The Cold Honor of the North

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The Gathering Storm

The road to Rosebarrow Keep lay wide beneath the gray sky, its wheel-rutted length flanked by skeletal trees and the slumbering gold of autumn grain. Rain misted in lazy streaks, painting the stones a darker hue, and ahead, where the banners of Rivermarch hung slack on the keep's high walls, crows circled like idling thoughts. Sir Jareth Lythorne rode at the head of the small column, his crimson cloak snapping against the chill, the sigil of the Argent Guard stitched in fading gold at its hem.

He rode like he fought: straight-backed, careless, and faster than wisdom advised. His destrier, a black beast with fire in its hooves, carried him with a wariness bred from years of battle, as if even the horse knew better than to fully trust its master. Jareth's hair, black as wet ink, curled against the damp edges of his brow, and his eyes—green as broken glass—surveyed the horizon not with caution, but with appetite.

"A fine place to die," he said, more to the wind than to his companions.

"You'd know," muttered Sarn behind him, the dwarf's voice rough as gravel and twice as bitter. "You've done it often enough in the songs."

Jareth smiled without turning. "Songs lie. But the ones about me at least try to be interesting."

"Arrogant bastard," Sarn grunted.

"True," said Jareth, nudging his horse forward. "But I am your arrogant bastard, today."

Jorund Blackhail rode in silence, his cloak drawn tight, eyes never leaving the keep. There was something of the frost in him—still, patient, unreadable. He'd spoken little since they passed the boundary stone of Dawnspear lands, though his gaze lingered long on each peasant they passed, as if searching their faces for some forgotten name.

Behind them, Teren Blackfoot hummed a lewd tavern tune under his breath, pretending not to notice the tension crawling up from the stones. His cloak was soaked, but his boots were polished, and not a fleck of mud dared touch his gleaming beard-rings. Every so often he glanced at Jareth's back with a half-smile, as if amused to be sharing a road with a legend whose fame smelled faintly of blood and vanity.

They reached the first checkpoint—a stone gatehouse flanked by halberdiers in Dawnspear green. The guards straightened when they saw the crimson cloak, but did not bow.

"State your names and intent," one said, youthful and uncertain.

Jareth dismounted in one graceful movement and handed his reins to no one. "Sir Jareth of House Lythorne. Warden of the Western Marches. I bear authority to mediate on behalf of House Blackmoor, per the Treaty of Copperford and the Signet of the Argent Guard."

The guard blinked, uncertain whether to salute or call for a superior. He did neither.

“Open your damn gate,” Sarn growled, stepping forward with a glare that could curdle wine. “Unless you fancy explaining to your lord why the peacemaker turned around and let the next war start without him.”

That got the gate moving.

As they passed beneath the arch, Jorund murmured low, “They fear him more than you.”

“Good,” said Jareth. “I’m prettier.”

Rosebarrow Keep came into view, its moss-covered stones rising from a bed of mist, towers flickering with torchlight as if already expecting guests with knives under their tongues. Jareth adjusted the clasp on his cloak and slowed his pace, letting the others catch up.

“Smile, friends,” he said without warmth. “We're here to keep the peace.”

Teren snorted. “And if peace doesn’t want to be kept?”

“Then we keep the appearance of peace,” said Jareth, brushing a strand of wet hair from his brow, “while the real thing drowns quietly in a well.”

The great hall of Rosebarrow Keep was warmer than the road, though the warmth came more from firelight than welcome. High above, banners hung limp between pillars of oaken stone, their edges frayed from old wars and older rains. The chamber smelled of smoke, oil, and wet wool, and the assembled nobles watched the new arrivals with the eager discomfort of men awaiting either feast or funeral.

Selara Lythorne stood at the head of the hall, robed in emerald trimmed with sable, her raven-dark hair pinned high, her jaw set in a curve too sharp for anything but command. Time had not softened her. If anything, it had burnished her to a crueler brilliance—like glass forged in fire. Her eyes, the same cold green as her brother’s, fixed on him with a stare that measured everything and revealed nothing.

“Jareth,” she said, voice smooth as velvet over broken glass. “You took your time.”

He removed his gloves slowly, deliberately. “The roads in Rivermarch are as twisted as its alliances.”

A few in the hall chuckled nervously. Selara did not.

She descended the dais with feline grace, each step measured, the clatter of her heels echoing like punctuation. When she reached him, she stood too close, her hand brushing his arm as if in affection. It was not affection.

“I see you brought your monsters,” she whispered, eye flicking toward Sarn and Jorund.

“And my charm,” he replied, brushing an imaginary speck from her shoulder.

“Let’s not pretend we still speak the same language,” she said, turning from him to face the assembled nobles. “My lords and ladies, the knight of the west has arrived. Now we may proceed—unless someone wishes to accuse him of murder before the wine is poured.”

The nobles murmured, uncertain whether it was jest or warning.

“Have I missed a hanging?” Jareth asked, taking a goblet from a servant without waiting for permission.

Selara gave him a smile sharp enough to draw blood. “Not yet. But your arrival does complicate matters. The border dispute is worse than the letters suggest.”

“Then we will untangle it,” Jareth said, raising his cup. “With ink or iron, as needed.”

Selara walked beside him, guiding him toward the council alcove, her voice low. “The farmers riot, the soldiers posture, and every merchant claims theft. The Blackmoors blame Dawnspear, Dawnspear blames Goldreach. And beneath it all, my children sleep in a keep filled with knives.”

He glanced at her then, the smile fading. “Does Ardrick know?”

She laughed, quiet and bitter. “Ardrick drinks. The children are strong, clever... and his only in name.”

Jareth did not respond. His fingers tightened on the goblet, then relaxed.

“Why did you summon me, Selara?” he asked.

She turned to face him fully, the firelight catching the hard planes of her face. “Because they listen to you when they want war. And I need them to listen while we pretend we still have peace.”

He studied her in silence. Once, long ago, they had shared a cradle. Now they shared only blood and secrets.

“Then let’s lie well,” he said.

She leaned in, her voice like silk over steel. “You’ll do your part. Or I’ll burn this keep down myself and name the ashes king.”

In the shadowed side-chamber beyond the court’s eyes, they gathered like mismatched blades placed on the same rack—some dull, some gleaming, all dangerous in their own way.

Jorund Blackhail leaned against the far wall, arms folded, his weathered cloak still damp from the ride. The fire snapped softly, but he stood apart from it, the warmth of the room seeming to stop short of him. His eyes never left the door, not even when Sarn dropped his heavy frame into a bench with a grunt and a clatter of steel.

“Too many nobles,” Sarn muttered, rubbing his brow as if scraping out a headache. “Too many smells. That hall reeked of perfume and cowardice.”

“Not all perfumes,” said Teren Blackfoot, strolling in with a goblet in one hand and a piece of bread in the other. “I caught lavender. A hint of nutmeg. And at least one woman wearing something expensive enough to make a bishop beg.” He took a bite. “Gods, I missed court food.”

“Court poison, more like,” said Sarn, eyeing him.

Teren only grinned and poured the rest of the wine into Sarn’s mug.

Viremon the Velvet entered last, as he always did—so silently that only Jorund noticed. Clad in shadowed robes, he moved like a breath forgotten, his pale hands clasped before him as if he carried a secret in each finger. No one had summoned him, yet no one was surprised he arrived. In the corners of every realm, there was always a whisper about Viremon. That he was already listening.

“My lords,” he said with no inflection, his voice as calm as still water. “We are all here.”

“We’re not lords,” grunted Sarn.

“Titles change,” Viremon replied. “Motives don’t.”

Jareth remained by the hearth, swirling the last of his wine, watching the others as if waiting for someone to declare themselves traitor. He wasn’t joking. He never did, when it came to war.

“We’re not here for the same reason,” said Jorund, quiet but certain.

“No,” said Viremon. “But we are all here because of Selara.”

Sarn snorted. “Speak for yourself. I came to kill whoever needs killing and drink whatever doesn’t stab back.”

“I came,” said Teren, “to escape a family that would rather sell its sons than bury them. And, perhaps, to get rich, drunk, or famous—any two will do.”

Jorund’s expression darkened. “I came because Thornhart blood has been spilled at the border. And my father refuses to lift a sword without proof.”

“And I,” Viremon said, gliding toward the fire, “came to see if peace is still possible—or if the kingdom must be carved into silence once more.”

Jareth let out a breath like a laugh, but there was no humor in it.

“Then let’s call this what it is,” he said. “Not a council. A reckoning. Selara wants peace. Dawnspear wants coin. Blackmoor wants the mines. And the Crown wants to stay on its feet long enough to kneel again.”

He drained his goblet and tossed it aside.

“We’re not here to mediate,” he said. “We’re here to choose which lie we’re going to tell first—and who bleeds before the truth gets spoken.”

The Riverfront Market of Rosebarrow teemed with late-morning clamor—fishmongers shouting over the rain, traders unloading barrels of spiced rye, goats bleating, children darting between stalls with sticky fingers and quick excuses. The party had scattered briefly at Jareth’s behest, each taking measure of the town beneath the keep. Teren bartered with a bookseller; Jorund watched the crowd like a wolf watching sheep; Sarn bought nothing but eyed everything. Even Viremon, robed and half-invisible, moved among the milling masses like a rumor drifting on fog.

The trouble started over barley.

A merchant from Dawnspear accused a local woman—one of the Blackmoor hillfolk—of watering her grain and cheating his scales. The words grew louder, sharper. Then someone threw a handful of flour. Then someone drew a knife.

Jareth was still halfway down the steps from the main square when he heard the scream. He broke into a run, hand not yet on his sword—he had learned to let chaos bloom for a breath before intervening. Jorund was already there, shoving through the crowd, but too slow to stop the first cut.

The Dawnspear man bled from the shoulder, staggering into a crate of cabbages. His companions drew steel.

Then Sarn moved.

He didn’t run. He simply walked forward, drawing his blade not like a knight, but like a butcher reaching for his cleaver. One of the men turned to face him—saw the size of him, the fire in his eyes, the twisted line of scars along his jaw—and hesitated.

Sarn did not.

He slammed his shield into the man’s face with a sickening crunch, sending teeth scattering across cobblestones. Another attacker lunged—Sarn caught the man’s wrist mid-swing, twisted, and buried his knee in the man’s gut. The third had the poor judgment to try to run.

Sarn hurled his axe after him.

It struck the fleeing man in the thigh, toppling him into a pile of turnips with a scream that quieted the market in an instant.

The silence that followed was profound. Even the goats stopped bleating.

Sarn stood amid the wreckage, breathing heavy, his eyes wild and unfocused for a moment—lost in some old fire, far from here. Blood trickled down the edge of his gauntlet.

Then Jareth stepped beside him.

“You always make an entrance,” Jareth said.

Sarn didn't look at him. "They started it."

"You finished it too quickly," Jareth replied, his voice calm. "Next time, leave someone conscious. We'll need names."

Teren arrived, dusting off his tunic and glancing at the groaning heap on the ground. "Do we get to pretend this was justice, or shall we just bribe the sheriff early?"

Jorund crouched beside the wounded trader, checking his pulse. "Not dead," he said flatly.

"Yet," said Sarn.

Viremon appeared beside a nearby stall, unnoticed until he spoke. "Word of this will reach the keep by dusk. You've revealed your steel, Sir Lythorne. The game now begins with fear."

Jareth looked out at the watching townsfolk—farmers, guards, nobles' agents—eyes wide with a mixture of awe and terror.

"Good," he murmured. "Let them remember who keeps the peace now."

The council chamber stank of wet parchment and old pride. Dusk pressed hard against the windows, and outside, the rain came thicker now—heavier, as if the sky had grown weary of holding its tongue. Inside, the nobles of Rosebarrow huddled around the long table, voices rising and splintering like glass under strain. Selara stood at its head, her face unreadable, fingers drumming in silent rhythm against the polished oak.

Jareth leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, boots muddy, expression unreadable but not unamused. Sarn lounged against the wall with a fresh bruise under one eye, more content now that blood had been spilled. Jorund sat stiffly beside him, arms tight across his chest, while Teren whispered sarcastic barbs into a wine cup no one had filled for him. Viremon had not sat at all. He lingered behind the tapestries, a shadow waiting for a signal.

The doors opened without knock or ceremony.

A courier stumbled in, soaked to the bone, her tunic bearing the silver thistle of Frostmark. She looked barely old enough to hold a dagger, but her eyes had the fixed emptiness of someone who had ridden too long and too hard.

"My lords," she gasped. "I bear message from Coldhearth. Lady Serenya's brother, Lord Edran Thornhart, has been attacked."

The room fell still.

Selara's eyes narrowed. "Attacked where?"

"In the royal court, Your Grace. Eldenor. At a supper with the prince's inner circle." The courier hesitated, then continued, voice trembling. "Prince Jhaeryn struck him. Broke his jaw. Had him dragged from the hall like a drunk. No cause given."

There was a pause—a deep, dangerous quiet, as if the entire room inhaled and held the breath.

“Gods,” whispered Teren. “That boy wears silk and drinks blood.”

Sarn chuckled bitterly. “And they still call him a prince.”

Jorund rose from his seat like thunder gathering.

“He struck Thornhart blood,” he said, voice low but shaking. “In a hall lit by witnesses. In court.”

“He knows what he does,” said Viremon, emerging from the shadows at last. “And whom it provokes. This is no tantrum. It’s a message.”

Jareth stood slowly, hand resting on the pommel of his sword. “Then let’s return the favor.”

Selara raised a hand, not for calm, but for order.

“No,” she said. “Not yet. Thornhart cannot march without the Crown branding them rebels. And Eldenor cannot be challenged while the lords remain divided.”

Jareth turned to her, brow furrowed. “He struck her brother.”

“I know.” Selara’s voice held no tremor. “And he will pay. But not in the way he expects. The game changes now. He thinks to show dominance through violence.”

She looked to each of them, gaze sharp as drawn steel.

“Let us answer with unity. And poison.”

Viremon nodded once. “The first piece has moved.”

Outside, the rain began to drum harder against the roof, like the sounding of distant war drums—slow, steady, inevitable.

Bound by Ice

The tower chamber assigned to Lady Serenya Thornhart was draped in velvet and lies. Silk sheets, rosewood mirrors, polished silver combs—gifts all, laid out like apologies in a prison. Beyond the frost-laced window, the spires of Eldenor glinted under a pale sun, their obsidian faces gleaming like blades in waiting. Below, the Court of the Binding Flame murmured and shifted like a serpent in a golden bowl.

Serenya sat at her writing desk, hands trembling slightly as she dipped the quill. She had chosen a simple parchment, unmarked, no crest. Her letters had grown shorter these past weeks, her flourishes fewer, her rhymes vanished. Truth, she had learned, could not wear perfume and still survive.

To Lord Edran of Coldhearth, she wrote.

Brother, I fear the sun lies here. Each smile carries weight, and each word a hook. The prince... he is not what our ballads promised. There is cruelty beneath his calm. I do not say this lightly. I fear I am—

She stopped. A knock on the door.

Her breath caught. She did not answer.

The door did not open.

She folded the letter hastily, slipping it into the inner seam of her bodice. She would give it to the kitchen girl tonight—Elsbeth, the one with kind eyes and quiet feet. There were ways to slip messages out. There always had been.

She stood and walked to the window, staring past the city walls to the north, where snow-capped peaks marked home like the edge of a blade. Her fingers found the charm at her neck —a tiny shard of quartz, cold as her skin. A gift from her mother when she first left Frostmark.

A whisper of movement behind her.

She turned, slowly.

Viremon the Velvet stood near the door, robed as ever in silence, a scroll in his hand, unread, unopened. He gave her a smile that was neither kind nor cruel.

“Forgive the intrusion, my lady. I bring word of your brother.”

She moved cautiously, chin lifted. “Is he well?”

“He breathes,” Viremon said. “Though lately, less freely.”

Serenya’s hand twitched toward her bodice.

“May I?” he said, gesturing to the chair by the hearth.

She did not answer. He sat anyway.

“There are many who watch you, Lady Serenya. Too many. You are... interesting. A Thornhart rose, bloomed in southern frost. But roses wilt in strange gardens. You write often.”

She froze.

He continued, tone conversational. “Your penmanship is admirable. A pity your messages never seem to reach the post.”

She moved back toward the window, the stone sill cold beneath her fingers.

“You read them,” she said quietly.

“I read all things,” he replied. “That is my burden.”

“Then you know what he is,” she said, voice shaking. “What he’s done.”

“I know,” Viremon said. “But truth, my lady, is a mirror. Most cannot bear to look too long.”

He rose.

“I suggest fewer letters,” he added gently. “And more listening. Survival is not surrender. Not always.”

She said nothing.

When the door closed behind him, she reached for the letter hidden in her dress. Then, slowly, she took it to the hearth and fed it to the fire.

The flames took the truth without protest.

The wind howled through the parapets of Rosebarrow Keep as if it, too, had heard the news. In the candlelit chamber where the party had reconvened, Jorund Blackhail stood like a statue carved of storm-dark stone, fists clenched at his sides. The flicker of the hearth cast shifting light across his face, but his eyes held steady, fixed on Jareth with the weight of old blood and fresh insult.

“He struck Edran,” Jorund said. “Dragged him from court like a criminal. In full view of the king’s council.”

Jareth leaned against the window alcove, one hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword, the other cradling a goblet he hadn’t touched. His green eyes watched the dwarf with a weariness earned not from battle, but from what followed it.

“I know,” he said quietly.

“Then we ride,” Jorund growled. “We ride now. Thornhart steel must answer. Or we lose what little respect we still command.”

Jareth sighed, straightening. “And we do what? March on Eldenor with a handful of blades and a banner stained in pride?”

“He humiliated my brother—your kin by alliance. There must be blood,” Jorund snapped.

“There will be,” Jareth said. “But not yours. Not yet.”

Sarn chuckled from the corner. “There’s always a 'not yet' with knights. That’s how they lie to themselves while waiting to stab someone properly.”

Jareth ignored him. “You strike now, Jorund, and you give the Crown cause to brand Thornhart treasonous. That’s what Jhaeryn wants. He provokes you, because he knows pride runs thick in the snowborn. March, and you march into his trap.”

Jorund stepped forward, teeth clenched. “You think I care for the Crown’s whisperings? My brother lies broken in a foreign hall.”

“And if you want him avenged, then wait,” Jareth said sharply. “We do not swing at bait. We drag the net tighter.”

Teren, sprawled in a chair by the hearth, glanced between them. “There’s a saying in Goldreach: only the poor strike back without a plan. The rich wait until the wound costs profit.”

“No one asked your tongue,” Jorund muttered.

“I offer it freely. It's the only thing I have left of value.”

Jareth stepped between them, voice calm but flint-edged. “We will not win this with honor, Jorund. Not with swords alone. Selara has a plan. Let her work it. And when the time comes... you will strike. Harder than you ever dreamed.”

Jorund stared at him, jaw tight. Then, slowly, he turned away, storm burning in his silence.

Viremon’s voice rose from the shadows behind them. “He plays the long game now. Which is wise. But the prince has begun a war that will not end with letters.”

No one argued.

Outside, the wind carried with it the scent of coming snow—and something colder still, that no fire could warm.

In the dim glow of her private solar, Selara Lythorne studied the faces of the lords gathered before her like a player sizing a board before moving the first piece. The chamber smelled of crushed myrrh and old vellum, the scent of decisions meant to linger. Rosebarrow’s lesser bannermen had come in answer to her summons, but they did not yet know whether they sat before a queen, a conspirator, or a storm.

“Frostmark demands response,” said Lord Merren, a sallow man whose beard looked older than his teeth. “They call for war in all but word.”

“And the Crown sends silence,” muttered Lady Ghenna of Oakmere, twisting her rings.

Selara gave a gentle smile, folding her hands. “And so we must act. But not recklessly. We are not snowborn—we do not spill blood at the first sting.”

Merren snorted. “Then what do we send? Apology?”

“Symbol,” she said, her voice slicing through his like silk across skin. “We send my brother. And his... companions.”

A silence rippled across the room.

“You would send Sir Jareth as emissary?” Ghenna asked warily. “He is no diplomat.”

“No,” Selara said. “He is a blade. And blades speak well in Frostmark.”

She rose, moving toward the hearth, each step deliberate. “He will carry my banner. As a gesture. The Blackmoors cannot send troops—politics forbid it. But a band of neutral peacekeepers, bearing only council and coin? That we can allow.”

“Peacekeepers,” Merren said with a sneer. “With a reputation like his?”

“Exactly.” Selara’s eyes glinted. “They will not expect peace from him. Which makes his restraint more valuable than a thousand scrolls.”

“And if he fails?” Ghenna asked.

“Then we call it his failure, not ours,” she said smoothly. “I grant him no command, no seal. Only my trust, which can be withdrawn.”

She returned to her seat, steepling her fingers.

“They’ll be received in Coldhearth without sparking war. They’ll root out the cause of this insult, or bury it. And should the Thornharts be tempted to act... Jareth’s presence will remind them the South still watches.”

She paused, allowing just enough silence to seem uncertain—just enough to make them feel they had chosen it themselves.

Ghenna nodded slowly. “A leash disguised as liberty.”

Selara smiled. “That is diplomacy.”

Later, as her chamber emptied, Viremon emerged from the shadows by the wall, his face unreadable.

“They suspect you of planning three moves ahead,” he said.

Selara poured herself wine without looking at him. “Good. I’m planning five.”

He watched her in silence.

“And your brother?” he asked.

She sipped, then set the cup down.

“He’ll think he’s saving the realm. And while he does, I’ll save something far more fragile.”

“What’s that?”

“My legacy.”

The trail into the highlands of Stonevale coiled like a serpent through frostbitten cliffs and shadow-choked ravines. The party rode in silence most hours, their breath fogging the cold air, hooves cracking over frozen mud and the brittle remains of autumn. Snow whispered along the mountain wind, not yet thick enough to blind, but constant enough to remind them that winter did not ask permission in these lands.

Jareth led, as he always did, a red smear of cloak against the white and gray. He rode with casual ease despite the dangerous footing, but his gaze never strayed far from the ledges above. Blackmoor territory was technically safe, but loyalty here came tempered by rock and blood. Knights turned brigands as quickly as ice turned to avalanche.

Sarn muttered curses with every mile. His mount, a stubborn mule with more sense than speed, seemed to resent him as much as he resented it. He wore no hood, letting the cold chew at his ears as if he welcomed the sting.

“These hills smell like old lies,” he growled. “And murder.”

Teren adjusted the folds of his cloak for the fifth time in an hour, muttering about comfort and cursed winds. “You’d think with all this blasted wealth and heritage, Blackmoor could pave a road that doesn’t try to kill you.”

“They pave with bones,” Jorund said from the rear. “You just don’t recognize the stones.”

Viremon, wrapped in shadow-hued wool, rode without complaint or comment. The wind did not seem to touch him. His horse followed without command, as if trained to obey silence.

Near dusk, they passed a ruined outpost, its watchtower split in half by a rockslide long ago. Jareth signaled a halt.

“We rest here,” he said. “Fire, food, one watch awake at all times.”

Sarn tied his mule to a half-buried post and dropped to the ground with a grunt. “This the part where you inspire us with tales of glory and brotherhood?”

“No,” Jareth said, dismounting. “This is the part where we eat cold meat and pray the storm waits another day.”

As the fire crackled to life beneath a crumbling arch, Teren passed around dried goat sausage and bitter root. No one spoke much. In this land, even words had a cost.

Jorund sat apart, sharpening his blade with slow, steady strokes, the rhythmic scrape of stone on steel a hymn older than any prayer.

“We’ll reach Coldhearth in two days,” Jareth said, breaking the silence. “Maybe less if the snow holds.”

“And if it doesn’t?” asked Teren.

Jareth glanced toward the sky. The clouds were thickening.

“Then we find out which of us is truly northern.”

In the firelight, their breath curled like smoke offerings to a cold god. The mountain loomed above them, vast and unmoved.

They stopped the next evening at a stone-walled inn perched just above a frozen gorge, its hearthlight spilling warmth into the twilight like an open secret. The place was modest by southern standards—coarse wool hangings, carved oak beams, a hunting dog asleep in the corner—but here in the Blackmoor heights, it was luxury. Travelers spoke low around the long table, sharing meat, fire, and wary glances.

Teren Blackfoot, freshly washed and dressed in a doublet too fine for a mountain road, found his way to the fire as if summoned. The innkeeper’s daughter—a broad-shouldered girl with a scar over her brow—blushed when he complimented her wine, and a minor noblewoman in a storm-blue cloak soon found herself laughing over his tales of drunken courtiers and misplaced wedding vows.

Lady Reva of Stonevale was not beautiful, but she was clever, and her eyes had the sharp weight of someone who’d seen enough death to be amused by charm rather than disarmed. She toyed with her goblet as Teren spun a tale about a goat, a bishop, and a chamber pot, then tilted her head thoughtfully.

“You’re Goldmere,” she said suddenly.

Teren blinked, still smiling. “Not in my heart.”

“In your cheek, then,” she replied. “And your boots.”

He inclined his head. “Guilty.”

She leaned closer, lowering her voice. “Then tell me, son of gold and gossip—do your ears hear truth as easily as jest?”

He sobered, just enough. “Sometimes. If the wine is good and the company honest.”

She looked around the room, then back at him. “Word from the Frostmark border says not all Thornharts sing from the same hymnal anymore. There are whispers of a cousin—Aeron, I think—speaking to Goldmere agents. Riling up the outer lords. Saying Coldhearth’s grown too soft under Lord Kulvar.”

Teren’s smile faded into something quieter, colder. “A rebellion?”

“Not yet,” Reva said. “But the land’s dry, and someone’s striking flint.”

He offered her a second drink and a slower smile. “My lady, I believe I’ve just fallen in love with your sense of discretion.”

She chuckled. “You’re not my type. But I do like a man who listens.”

Later, as the fire dimmed and the party retired one by one, Teren slipped into Jareth’s chamber, his boots silent on the stone.

“There’s trouble in the blood at Coldhearth,” he said without preamble. “Not just from outside. From within.”

Jareth nodded once. “Then we tread carefully.”

Teren looked toward the window, where frost was blooming against the glass like veins.

“Carefully,” he said, “may not be enough.”

Coldhearth

The walls of Coldhearth rose like the bones of an ancient beast from the frozen pines, each tower a sentinel lost in time. Black stone stained with ice, banners unmoving in the dead air, and the great gates carved with the sigil of House Thornhart—flame encased in frost. Snow drifted lightly in the gray morning, muffling the sounds of hooves and bootfall as the party crossed beneath the portcullis and into the keep’s cold shadow.

Jorund rode first this time, though he hadn’t meant to. The others fell in behind him without discussion. Here, in the land of his father, silence held more meaning than ceremony. He dismounted without a word, gaze lifting to the hall that had never been home, even when it had housed his youth.

They were met in the stone courtyard by guards clad in wolf-gray cloaks and blackened mail. None smiled. One stepped forward to announce them, though the entire keep had surely known of their coming since they’d crossed the outer valley.

“Lord Kulvar awaits,” said the guard. “In the old hall.”

Jorund nodded once and strode ahead. The others followed, the crunch of snow beneath their boots the only sound until the doors opened with a groan like an old wound being stirred.

The hall was cold, not just in temperature but in spirit. No tapestries, no music. Only the long table of dark oak, a fire that refused to warm the room, and Lord Kulvar Thornhart seated in his high-backed chair as if he were carved from the same stone as the walls.

He had not aged in the way other men did—his beard was the same iron-gray, his eyes the same glacial steel. But there was a deeper stillness in him now, a hollowness that came not from time, but from absence. His gaze passed over Jareth, over Sarn and Teren and even Viremon, before settling on Jorund.

“Bastard,” he said. Not cruelly. Just as a fact.

“Father,” Jorund replied, the word flat, stripped of affection.

“You return with southern company and Crown-appointed purpose,” Kulvar continued. “Strange tools for a boy who once said he'd never kneel to a highborn again.”

“I’m not here to kneel,” Jorund said. “Nor to speak for kings. I come with a warning.”

“You come too late.” Kulvar stood, slow but unbowed. “My son lies broken in Eldenor. And my halls echo with whispers of betrayal.”

He stepped down from the dais, stopping before Jareth. “And you—King’s Bane—bring steel dressed as peace?”

Jareth met his gaze without flinching. “I bring steel dressed as consequence.”

There was a moment’s stillness, brittle as icicles before the fall.

Then Kulvar turned, robe trailing behind him, and spoke without looking back. “You are welcome in Coldhearth. For now. But speak carefully. Here, words weigh more than gold. And blood, once spilled, is not easily washed from the snow.”

He vanished into the deeper shadows of the keep, leaving the party to the cold and one another.

Teren let out a long breath. “Hospitality in the North is everything they promised.”

Sarn snorted. “Better a cold welcome than a warm knife.”

Jorund said nothing. His eyes lingered on the seat his brother once filled, now empty, the dust undisturbed.

The guest chambers were sparse—stone walls, fur throws, and the distant groan of timbers under snow—but better than tents and cold ground. The party dispersed without comment, each seeking warmth or distance. Only Jorund lingered in the corridor outside the great hall, hands behind his back, staring at a worn tapestry of the First Flame—his supposed ancestor—locked in eternal battle with some long-forgotten king.

Footsteps echoed down the passage, brisk and sure. Then came the voice, sharp and familiar.

“You’ve brought southerners into our hall like beggars with blades. Bold, even for you.”

Jorund turned. His half-brother Eryk stood a few paces away, armored in fine steel over wolf pelts, the Thornhart sigil embossed in silver on his breastplate. His face was all angles and cold pride, handsome in the way statues are—meant to be admired, not embraced.

“Edran lies broken because you hesitated,” Eryk said.

“I came when I learned,” Jorund replied, voice even. “Not all of us sit comfortably beside Father waiting for the realm to rot.”

Eryk's smile was all venom. "Still the bastard with a bark and no banner."

From the stairwell behind them, a second voice spoke, gentler but firmer. "That's enough, both of you."

Serenya's older sister, Lady Mirea, descended with her arms folded, the weight of responsibility resting on her brow like a crown no one wanted. Her hair was bound in a tight braid, and her eyes, though kinder than Eryk's, held little patience.

"We need unity now," she said. "Not peacock fights."

Eryk stepped back but did not bow. "Tell that to our guest," he muttered, brushing past them into the hall.

Jorund stared after him, jaw tight.

"You know he'll never see you as anything but the crack in the family glass," Mirea said softly.

"And yet," Jorund replied, "he's the one that breaks things when he speaks."

She almost smiled. Almost.

In the dining chamber that evening, the tension was thick as frost. Every step echoed too loud. Every glance lingered too long. Sarn drank in silence, twitching whenever a servant passed behind him. Teren tried to charm a sour-faced steward and was met with a scowl. Even Jareth, polished and poised, ate with more calculation than appetite.

Viremon said nothing, but his eyes moved from sibling to sibling like a man reading an ancient script written in salt and grief.

After dinner, Jorund found himself alone in the weapons hall, tracing a scar in the stone where his brother's blade had once struck during training. The weight of silence pressed hard. Every echo in this keep carried a memory.

Behind him, Jareth appeared with a goblet of wine and a knowing look.

"You should punch him," Jareth said.

Jorund arched a brow.

"Eryk," Jareth clarified. "You'll feel better. He'll feel worse. Balance."

Jorund exhaled, just short of laughter.

"I'm not here to fight them," he said.

"No," Jareth agreed. "You're here to prove you don't have to."

And that, Jorund thought, might be the harder of the two.

The training yard at Coldhearth was a frozen pit of churned snow and iron posts, ringed by old timber and harder men. That morning, Sarn had wandered there with nothing but a hangover and the need to hit something that wouldn't scream unless it bled. He found both in equal measure.

It began with words. They always did.

Captain Vaelin Thornhart, a sharp-jawed man of noble blood and narrow mind, took one look at Sarn's rusted axe and mismatched armor and scoffed.

"Is this the beast Blackmoor sends to parley with the North?" he sneered, loud enough for every squire to hear. "Your leash too loose, mutt?"

Sarn, chewing a strip of dried meat and glaring through his good eye, spat into the snow. "If you want to see loose," he growled, "draw that butter-knife you call a sword."

Vaelin obliged, too proud and too foolish to know he'd already lost.

The duel was not sanctioned, but no one stopped it. That was the way in Frostmark—offense answered in steel, and those who survived earned the right to speak again.

They cleared a circle in the snow, and a hush fell over the yard. Jareth arrived just as blades clashed, his expression unreadable. Jorund stood beside him, arms folded, saying nothing. Teren leaned against a post, idly betting with a stablehand.

Vaelin moved like a dancer, elegant and rehearsed. His blade sang through the air with polished grace.

Sarn fought like a drunk avalanche.

The Thornhart captain landed a cut early, slicing across Sarn's upper arm, drawing a cheer from the gathered men. Sarn only laughed—a guttural, joyless sound—and closed the gap.

He caught Vaelin's next thrust on the shaft of his axe, slammed a shoulder into the captain's ribs, and sent him sprawling into the slush. Before the man could rise, Sarn stepped forward and stomped his boot down on Vaelin's sword hand, hard enough to break something.

"You done?" he asked.

Vaelin, white with pain, nodded.

Sarn spat again, wiped his axe on the snow, and turned away.

Some of the onlookers laughed. Others turned their backs.

Jorund stepped forward, meeting Sarn halfway. "You didn't have to break his hand."

Sarn snorted. "Didn't have to stop, either."

Later, in the hall, the event echoed in whispers. Some Thornhart guards muttered of southern beasts and Blackmoor arrogance. Others—especially the younger blades—spoke of Sarn with reluctant respect. In Frostmark, brutality earned attention. And scars told truer stories than titles.

Selara, informed by one of her spies, merely smiled when she heard.

“A leash,” she murmured to herself, “only matters if it holds.”

The great hall of Coldhearth had been stripped of its usual austerity for the occasion. A fresh tapestry bearing both the Thornhart flame and Eldenor’s Crown of Binding Flame hung over the hearth, and goblets of spiced wine passed from hand to hand as though the air itself needed sweetening. Yet beneath the forced festivity, there was a stillness to the room—a tension drawn tight as the string of a bow.

Lord Kulvar Thornhart stood before the gathered nobles, his voice as cold and heavy as glacier ice. His words cut through the murmurs.

“It is with solemn honor that I announce the binding of our house to the Crownlands. My daughter, Lady Serenya, shall be wed to Prince Jhaeryn Blackwain.”

A hush fell over the hall like a hammer.

Selara’s lips twitched into the faintest smile. Teren’s brow rose as he sipped his wine, too polite to choke. Viremon’s expression didn’t change, but his eyes flicked toward the far corner, where a servant was already slipping out to report the news.

Sarn leaned over and whispered to Jareth, “You think she said yes?”

Jareth didn’t answer. He was already watching Jorund.

The bastard of Thornhart had gone still. Paler than snow, jaw clenched, hands trembling not from shock—but fury.

“She doesn’t want this,” Jorund said quietly. “I know her.”

“You don’t know what she’s become,” Mirea whispered at his side, her voice brittle.

Jorund turned, voice rising just enough to pierce the quiet. “You would give her to that... creature? After what he did to Edran? After how he humiliated our house?”

Lord Kulvar’s eyes landed on him, hard as stone. “You forget your place.”

“No,” Jorund snapped. “I remember it. It’s the place from which I see the rot you let fester in her name.”

Guards stirred. Several hands drifted to hilts.

Jareth stepped forward, placing himself between Jorund and the dais with casual grace. “My lord,” he said smoothly, “forgive the outburst. Long roads and colder tempers.”

Kulvar said nothing for a long moment, then finally nodded. “Let him cool, or I shall do it for him.”

The gathering resumed its motion, though the tension never left. Laughter returned, but it rang false. Music resumed, but none danced.

Later, in the empty chapel beneath the keep, Jorund stood alone, lit only by the flicker of a lone votive candle. Jareth entered quietly behind him.

“I will stop this,” Jorund said, not turning.

“You won’t win by rushing,” Jareth replied. “This isn’t a duel. It’s a siege.”

Jorund looked up at the stone figure of an old Thornhart hero, blade raised in defiance.

“Then let them see,” he said. “That not all Thornharts bend. Some of us still remember how to stand.”

The snow fell heavy that night, muffling the world in white silence. Within the stone corridors of Coldhearth, the party moved like shadows through frost-chilled halls, following whispers, half-glimpsed figures, and a trail of questions no one wanted answered.

It was Teren who led them to the truth—half by accident, half by instinct. A loose-tongued squire in the wine cellar had mentioned gold changing hands near the raven tower, and Teren, ever curious when coin and scandal intersected, had followed the scent. Now they stood outside a side chamber near the east wing, listening as two voices argued in hushed but urgent tones.

“—You said the letters were burned.”

“They were. But the Goldmere man wants more. Proof. Action. Blood.”

A pause.

“If Jorund keeps speaking, if he stirs the house against the match, they’ll have what they want.”

“The prince’s insult wasn’t enough?”

“They want a war that starts here, in Frostmark. They want Thornhart divided.”

Jareth pushed the door open without ceremony.

Inside, two men froze. One was a Thornhart cousin—Aeron, tall and fox-eyed, known more for his hunting than his honor. The other, a man in Goldreach red, bearing no crest, turned and reached for a blade.

He never got there. Sarn was already moving.

In three strides, the Goldmere agent was slammed into the stone wall, blade clattering from nerveless fingers. Sarn pressed him there with one hand, his expression unreadable but his body humming with dangerous restraint.

“Aeron,” Jorund said, stepping into the room. “I had hoped even the worst of us remembered blood.”

Aeron sneered, but his eyes darted toward the floor. “Frostmark stands still while the South takes its daughters and spits on our sons. Goldmere offered a path.”

“You offered them our house,” Jorund snapped. “For coin.”

“They promised backing. Armies. If Coldhearth rose against the Crown, they’d—”

“They’d bleed us dry and take our mines when we fell,” Teren interrupted, folding his arms. “It’s an old dance, cousin. You just don’t know the steps.”

Viremon moved to the corner of the room, retrieving a packet of sealed letters hidden beneath a loose stone. His fingers brushed the wax with surgical care.

“These will speak louder than confessions,” he murmured. “Goldmere coin. Thornhart names. Treason dressed as justice.”

Aeron turned to Lord Jareth. “You’re not of this house. You don’t know—”

Jareth stepped forward, eyes like green flame. “I know enough. I know what betrayal smells like. And I know what happens when it’s not rooted out.”

Sarn released the Goldmere man and cracked his knuckles, the sound like bone breaking in silence.

“What now?” Teren asked.

“We bring it to Kulvar,” Jorund said. “No more pretending this house is whole.”

“And if your father protects him?” Jareth asked.

Jorund looked at the scrolls in Viremon’s hand, then at the bloodless cousin before him.

“Then I’ll break the house myself.”

Steel Beneath the Snow

The snows came heavy that week, sheeting the world in white silence. Pines drooped under the weight, and the wind whistled like distant mourning through the gorges. The Thornhart patrol had left Coldhearth with twelve men. Only five returned.

They stumbled back near dusk, half-frozen, bloodied, and broken in spirit. The gate wardens rushed to lift the portcullis as the survivors limped beneath it, dragging bodies behind them in crude sleds of torn branches. Jorund was among the first to reach them in the yard, sword already drawn by instinct.

“What happened?” he demanded, voice like cracked stone.

One of the survivors—a boy of barely sixteen—fell to his knees and vomited in the snow. Another, a grim-faced veteran named Marek, shook his head slowly, blinking through blood.

“Ambush,” he rasped. “On the pass to Ravenmoor. South of the Frostline. We were scouting the trade route.”

Jareth arrived behind Jorund, already scanning the sleds. “Bandits?”

“No,” Marek said, clutching at a ragged wound across his side. “Too clean. Too organized. They wore mismatched cloaks, but their blades...” He lifted one blood-crusted sword taken from the field and tossed it into the snow.

Teren picked it up, brushing frost from the hilt. He whistled low. “Blackened steel. See the engraving? That’s Goldreach smithing. Vault-forged.”

Jorund’s jaw clenched. “Then this wasn’t a raid. It was a message.”

“More like a move,” murmured Viremon from the gate’s shadow. “In a game none of us consented to, but all of us will play.”

Lord Kulvar descended into the yard moments later, his face hardening as he saw the bodies, the blood.

“They’re baiting us,” Jareth said, stepping forward. “They want Thornhart blades to march south, to break treaties, to turn this into war.”

“And we should,” barked one of the younger officers, face flushed with rage. “They’ve already started it!”

Kulvar’s voice cut through the yard like a winter wind. “And so we walk into their snare?”

He looked at Jorund then, eyes unreadable. “What would you do?”

Jorund stepped forward, blood flecking his cloak. “We bury our dead with fire. And we send riders. Quietly. We find where these bastards slept, who paid them, and how deep Goldmere’s hands run.”

He turned to Jareth. “And then we bleed them. Quietly. Precisely. Like a knife behind the curtain.”

Jareth nodded once. “That, I can support.”

Above them, snow began to fall again, slow and soundless, covering the blood before it could freeze.

The fire in Selara's chamber burned low, casting amber light across her writing desk, where a single sheet of parchment lay half-filled with careful ink. Outside, the wind keened across the ramparts like a ghost rattling bone, but within, all was still—except the deliberate scratching of quill to page.

She wrote with precision, every word a weapon in velvet.

To His Grace, Lord Halden Marran, High Scribe of the Royal Legate, Eldenor.

In light of recent unrest within the Northern houses and the regrettable insult suffered by Lord Edran Thornhart at the hands of Prince Jhaeryn, I must, as sister to Sir Jareth of House Lythorne and Regent of the West, express concern over Lady Serenya Thornhart's continued presence in court.

She dipped the quill again, pausing only long enough to blot the excess with a thin cloth. Her lips curled faintly—not in cruelty, but in calculation.

While I speak not on behalf of Coldhearth, I am honor-bound to uphold the terms of the Signet Accords and ensure the delicate balance between peacekeeping agents and the sovereign throne. My brother, presently engaged in diplomatic efforts between the realms, holds great concern for Lady Serenya's well-being, particularly as tensions rise between Goldreach and Frostmark.

Another stroke. Her handwriting never wavered, even when the ink darkened.

Sir Jareth urges that Lady Serenya be recalled to her kin—not as insult to the Crown, but as protection for her dignity, and a gesture to ease the tremors of distrust spreading northward. Should harm come to her in the halls of Eldenor, the unity we all so desperately cling to may crack beyond repair.

She signed it with the flourish of someone accustomed to power: *In loyal service to realm and reason—Lady Selara of House Lythorne, Regent of the West, Sister to the King's Bane.*

She sprinkled sand lightly across the page, let it set, then folded it with meticulous care and sealed it with green wax, pressing into it the seal of her lesser house—enough to show nobility, but not to spark scrutiny.

To the guards posted outside her door, she handed the letter in silence. "To the courier post. Fast. Unseen."

They bowed and vanished.

Only then did she exhale and return to the fire, where she stared into the flames and murmured to herself.

"They won't save you, sweet Serenya. But they'll move you. And that's enough."

The firelight danced across her eyes, and for a moment, they shone like polished emerald—cold, brilliant, and entirely unforgiving.

The trail into the high hills was barely more than a line of disturbed snow, half-erased by fresh flurries and the slow encroach of silence. Jorund led the party single file, lantern low, his instincts honed from childhood hunts in these wilds. The message they'd intercepted—a coded note tucked into the seam of a courier's satchel—had spoken of a "shipment" arriving under the iron arch before moonrise. Teren had deciphered it with a grin and a muttered curse.

"Goldmere's being clumsy," he'd said. "Or they want us to see."

Now the Iron Arch loomed before them—a jagged rock formation shaped like a shattered crown, overlooking a narrow ravine where no one without local knowledge would ever venture. But the hillfolk knew these paths. And Goldmere, it seemed, had found friends in the frost.

They saw the figures before they heard them—six at least, cloaked in gray and brown, gathered around a bundled crate. A lantern swayed from a hook driven into the ice, casting long shadows against the snowbank. One man wore the red-threaded sash of a Goldmere merchant-broker. The others bore the rough-cut axes and leather bands of the hill clans—those stubborn outliers too proud for lordship and too wild for allegiance.

From their ridge above, Jareth crouched beside Sarn and Jorund.

"They're armed," Jorund whispered. "But they don't expect a fight."

"Then let's not disappoint them," Sarn growled, already fingering the grip of his axe.

"Wait," said Viremon, voice soft and near. "We learn more if they don't know we're watching."

Teren leaned forward, squinting through the flurries. "They're handing out something—sacks. Coin. No... no, that's powdered ore. Black dust. High-grade iron. Goldmere's paying them in weapon stock."

A sharp voice echoed from below—one of the hillfolk, shouting.

"Thornhart bleeds while their bastard talks. We'll strike from the eastern ridge, and no one'll mourn it."

The Goldmere man nodded. "You'll have cover and coin. Just be quick. Let the South call it rebellion. We'll call it business."

Jareth's eyes narrowed. "They mean to attack. Soon."

Jorund was already rising, silent as a shadow.

But a misstep—just one—sent a stone clattering down the slope.

The spies below turned, hands flying to hilts.

“Damn it,” hissed Teren.

“Subtlety’s over,” said Sarn, leaping from the ridge with a snarl.

The party charged.

Steel met panic in the snow-blind dark. The Goldmere agent turned to flee but took Jareth’s dagger in the back before he could shout. One hillman swung wide at Viremon and found only air. The rest broke and scattered, leaving blood and sacks of black ore behind.

When it ended, three bodies lay cooling beneath the arch.

Jorund picked up one of the sacks and let the dark dust sift through his fingers.

“They’re fueling this with our own iron,” he said.

“And fire,” murmured Viremon. “The kind that doesn’t stop at the first village.”

Jareth wiped his blade clean and looked eastward, where the wind howled low through the pines.

“They’re not preparing for war,” he said. “They’ve already begun it.”

The message came not through a courier, but on a falcon.

It arrived just before dawn, its wings rimed with frost, its talons clawing at the shutter of the watchtower above Coldhearth. The bird wore no crest, only a small copper band marked with three notches—an old code from Eldenor’s deeper channels. The guard on duty had nearly dismissed it until Viremon appeared without sound, as though summoned by the bird’s breath.

He took the scroll without a word and descended the tower alone.

By the time he reached the undercroft—a chamber few even knew existed—he had peeled back the seal, examined the paper’s grain, and rubbed it gently between his fingers. It was northern bark parchment, common in Rivermarch, but the script beneath was southern—fine, slanted, and encoded in the old tongue of Goldmere’s merchant houses.

He lit a single candle. One flame. One truth.

The cipher unraveled beneath his eyes, not quickly, but cleanly. He had seen this hand before, in whispers sewn into ledgers and pleas hidden beneath love notes. And this one was not meant for him.

To His Highness, Prince Jhaeryn Blackwain, Scion of Fire and Crown,

The spark has taken. Thornhart lines fracture. Edran silenced. Jorund destabilized. Goldmere agents report positive engagements among the hill clans. The eastern ridge will

burn within the fortnight, if the Thornhart lords respond as expected. If Selara's envoy interferes, we suggest his removal—quiet or permanent.

In reward, the promised debt relief stands. Once Frostmark buckles, Blackmoor will be isolated, and the Crown restored to unquestioned supremacy. The fire you lit spreads, my prince. Soon, all will kneel, whether to flame or ash.

For honor, and profit.

—V.

Viremon read it twice.

Then he folded it with meticulous care and tucked it into the lining of his cloak.

Later, when the party gathered in the strategy chamber above the great hall, he laid the scroll flat upon the war table.

"I intercepted this before it reached Eldenor," he said. "Written by a Goldmere contact known only as V. Their style is distinct. Their reach, long."

He tapped the signature with one gloved finger.

"This was meant for Jhaeryn. It names him not in deed, but in implication—enough to damn him. Enough to expose that what we suspected is no longer theory, but confirmed intent."

Jareth scanned the message in silence. When he spoke, his voice was colder than the stone beneath them.

"He's not just a spoiled prince. He's engineering collapse."

Teren whistled. "Debt relief and hillfolk mercenaries. That's not ambition. That's a blueprint."

Sarn scowled. "So we kill him."

"No," said Jorund. "We do worse. We let him be seen."

Viremon's eyes glittered in the firelight. "And when that moment comes, you must all decide whether justice wears a crown… or a noose."

The war room of Coldhearth crackled with tension, though no fire burned. The scroll lay open on the table like a corpse with its secrets bared. Outside, snow lashed the windows in restless gusts, as though the mountain itself had grown impatient.

Jareth stood at the head of the table, fists planted on either side of the damning message. His jaw was set, his eyes burning green fire.

"I ride for Eldenor," he said. "With this in hand. The court must see it. Must know what he is."

“Fools know what he is,” Sarn growled, leaning back in his chair with arms crossed. “They just don’t care. They’re too fat with fear and feasts to stop him.”

Jorund stepped forward, shaking his head. “If you march to Eldenor with a paper and a claim, they’ll call it treason. Even with truth in your hand. They’ll destroy the message or kill you before it ever reaches a chamberlain’s table.”

“Then I’ll bring more than parchment,” Jareth said. “I’ll bring names. I’ll bring blood, if I must.”

“You think blood is justice?” Jorund asked, tone sharpening. “Then you’re no better than Jhaeryn.”

That stopped the room.

Sarn pushed off the wall, stepping into the silence. “Justice?” he said. “There’s no such thing. Just revenge in a prettier cloak. I’ve seen kings ‘serve justice’ with a laugh in their throat and piss on their boots.”

“Then what do you call it when a man answers for what he’s done?” Jorund asked.

“Rare,” Sarn snapped. “And usually fatal.”

Viremon watched them from the shadows, but did not intervene.

Jareth turned away from the table, pacing. “I won’t sit and play the long game while he poisons the realm. He struck a Thornhart. He incites rebellion. He treats lives like tools. If we wait—”

“We wait,” Jorund said, “to strike true. If we rush, we die loud and change nothing.”

Jareth stopped and faced him. “And what if you’re wrong? What if while we wait, he marries Serenya, crowns himself, and turns this whole realm into a firepit we no longer have the numbers to stop?”

Jorund said nothing at first. Then, quietly, “Then I’ll kill him myself. But not like this.”

Sarn spat into the fireless hearth. “You both talk too much. Pick a throat and start cutting. That’s how you shake truth loose.”

Teren raised a goblet in mock salute. “To justice, then—whatever that is. May it come before we’re all forgotten.”

No one laughed.

The storm outside grew louder, slamming against stone and timber like the fury of gods long buried.

And above the map of the Northern realms, the candlelight flickered, casting long shadows of men who had yet to agree on what was right—only that something must break.

Blood in the Pass

The snow had turned red once, long ago, in the place called Crimson Pass. Not from war—then—but from a rockslide that exposed a seam of iron-tinged stone that bled rust through every melt and thaw. But now the name fit too well. The pass had fallen to rebel hillfolk in the night. No declaration, no banners, just silence, and then word: no Thornhart patrols returned. No caravans passed. The southern path was cut.

Jareth rode at the head of the column, his cloak drawn tight, his eyes fixed on the narrowing trail as the wind funneled through the gorge. Behind him, Sarn led a second horse laden with spare blades and wrapped chain, whistling under his breath like a man stalking wolves. Jorund rode third, expression grim, hand never far from his hilt. The stone was familiar to him—he'd hunted these cliffs as a boy—but now every crag might hide a traitor.

Teren rode side-saddle on a stubborn gray gelding, trying to read a half-frozen scroll by the gray light of dawn, muttering about poor ink and worse intentions. "Lovely place for a murder," he muttered. "We should all take turns being bait."

Viremon, as ever, did not ride. He walked, cloak dragging in the snow, never sweating, never winded, as though the cold avoided him by pact. He said nothing, but his eyes traced the sky, the rock, the stillness.

They passed a waystone cracked with frost, the Thornhart sigil carved into it half-buried by snow. Beyond that, the trail narrowed into the throat of the pass—two walls of black stone, sheer and jagged, like the mouth of something vast and hungry.

Jorund halted them. "From here, no room to maneuver. We go in blades drawn."

"And hope they're fool enough to let us come close," Jareth said, already loosening his sword.

Sarn grinned. "If not, I've brought enough iron to build a wall from corpses."

Teren sighed. "Do we ever try diplomacy first?"

Sarn looked back at him. "We are."

They entered the pass at midmorning, the sky gray and bleeding snow, the world narrowing to a cold slit of stone and silence. Above them, the cliffs stood watch, unblinking.

The wind died.

And the silence broke.

From above, a horn sounded—low, raw, and close.

Jareth drew steel. "Form on me. Here comes the welcome."

And then the snow began to fall faster, as though the mountain knew what was coming and sought to bury it in advance.

The ambush came with startling precision—no clumsy charge, no shouted threats. Just the sudden whine of arrows slicing through wind, the snap of leather, the thud of impact. From the cliffs above, hillfolk archers loosed in practiced rhythm, their cloaks blending into stone and snow. Steel rang out as the party wheeled into formation, horses shrieking and rearing against the sudden death from above.

Teren cried out—a sharp, involuntary sound—as an arrow punched into his shoulder, spinning him from his saddle. He hit the ground hard, cloak twisting around him like a shroud, blood already seeping through the fabric. His gelding bolted, hooves kicking slush into the air.

"Teren!" Jorund shouted, diving toward the fallen dwarf without hesitation.

Another arrow struck near his boot as he slid across the snow, yanking Teren behind the cover of a rock outcrop just as a third arrow buried itself in the dirt where Teren's head had been.

"Stay down," Jorund ordered.

Teren gritted his teeth, laughing through the pain. "You're surprisingly gentle for a man who growls more than he speaks."

"You're too noisy to die today," Jorund muttered, ripping a strip from his cloak and pressing it to the wound. The arrow hadn't gone deep—blunted by angle or fortune—but blood ran freely. Jorund's hands moved with practiced speed, tying the cloth, sealing the breach.

Sarn surged past them with a roar, hurling his axe into the cliffs with such force it embedded itself in a frozen crevice. He leapt for a narrow ledge, catching a rebel by the ankle and pulling him down into the snow, blade already rising for the kill.

Jareth deflected a second volley with his shield, closing ranks near Jorund. "We need the heights," he barked. "Now!"

"I'll take them," Jorund said, rising with his sword in hand. He looked once more at Teren, who nodded, jaw clenched.

"Go," Teren said. "I'll live. Annoyingly."

Jorund didn't smile, but his nod was fierce.

Then he was gone—climbing the rocks like a man born of granite, scaling the sheer ridge with grim purpose. Above, the archers began to falter, shouts of alarm rising as they realized someone was coming for them.

Below, Teren pulled himself to a sitting position with a grunt. Viremon appeared beside him without sound, knelt, and handed him a flask of something dark and bitter.

“Drink,” Viremon said.

Teren did, wincing. “I liked it better when all I risked was scandal and indigestion.”

“You’re bleeding less than expected,” Viremon replied. “A good sign. Or a slow death.”

“Comforting.”

The battle surged overhead as Jorund reached the ledge, his blade flashing in the morning gray.

Teren watched him fight, breath fogging in the cold. “He doesn’t talk much,” he said aloud, to no one in particular. “But when he moves... it’s like the mountain answers him.”

Viremon said nothing. But he nodded once.

And below the cliffs, among the snow and blood, a bond deeper than coin or command quietly took root between the bastard and the exile.

The narrow ledges of the Crimson Pass became a killing ground. Steel sang against stone, screams echoed down frozen chutes, and the snow churned crimson beneath frenzied boots. The hillfolk fought with desperation—nimble, ruthless, emboldened by terrain and treachery. But they hadn’t accounted for the monster among their foes.

Sarn.

He fought like something unmade—howling, teeth bared, eyes glazed with a fury not wholly of the present. His axe was no longer a weapon, but an extension of grief, wrath, and old scars that refused to stay buried. He drove it into collarbones, faces, ribs, tearing through men with a savagery that defied tactics. He did not parry. He did not feint. He simply advanced, striking and striking until his enemies stopped moving.

One rebel threw down his sword and ran. Sarn hurled a dagger into his spine without even turning.

Another begged. “Mercy, please—I—”

Sarn split his skull mid-sentence.

“Mercy is a lie,” he snarled, gore dripping from his hands, breath ragged. “Mercy is for kings who need sleep.”

From below, Jareth watched him with a mixture of awe and unease. Even hardened men stepped back from Sarn’s path. When Jorund reached the summit, clearing the last of the archers, he paused to see Sarn slam his axe into a corpse long dead, over and over, each blow duller, slower, like a man trying to bury something deeper than flesh.

“Enough!” Jorund shouted, leaping down the slope.

Sarn didn’t hear. Or wouldn’t.

Jorund reached him and grabbed his shoulder—not gently. “Sarn.”

The dwarf turned, eyes wild and rimmed with frost. For a heartbeat, he didn’t seem to recognize him.

Then his breath caught.

The axe dropped.

Sarn stepped back, blinking, as if waking from a fever dream. His mouth opened, but no words came. Just the hollow rasp of a man who’d fallen too deep and clawed his way back only halfway.

Teren, still pale and leaning on a spear like a crutch, arrived last and took one look at the carnage.

“Remind me,” he said softly to Viremon, “never to share a tent with him.”

Even the wind had gone quiet.

Sarn wiped the blood from his face with a sleeve already soaked in it. He did not apologize. He only muttered, “They looked like someone else. For a moment. Long moment.”

Jareth nodded, but kept his distance. “You fought well,” he said. “But next time, save something of yourself.”

Sarn said nothing.

But he picked up his axe and walked alone to the edge of the pass, where the wind touched his face without judgment. And there, surrounded by the dead and the silence, he did not howl, or rage.

He just breathed.

By nightfall, the pass was theirs.

The last of the rebels had either fled into the high crags or bled into the snow. Coldhearth’s banner, hastily stitched and battle-stained, was raised on a pike driven into the frozen earth where the ridge opened toward the southern valleys. It flapped weakly in the wind, more statement than celebration.

The dead were gathered into rows. The wounded treated with what poultices and brandy they had. No songs were sung. The mountain, though momentarily stilled, offered no praise.

Jareth paced the ravine edge, boots crunching frost, mind racing. He had sent a rider south two nights past, requesting reinforcement from a nearby detachment of Eldenor’s forces—the king’s troops sworn to neutrality in all border disputes. They were meant to arrive by midday.

They had not come at all.

Until now.

Just after full dark, torches glimmered along the ridge. A column of soldiers, resplendent in crimson cloaks and black enamel armor, arrived like a theatre performance after the curtain had already fallen. Their captain, a lean man with careful posture and teeth too white, dismounted with a rehearsed look of concern.

“So much blood,” he said softly, surveying the carnage. “Tragic.”

Jareth’s smile was razor-thin. “You’re late.”

The captain bowed his head. “Snow held us. Terrain proved... unfavorable.”

“The same snow we marched through?” Jorund asked, stepping forward, hands clenched.

The captain offered a faint shrug. “You know how southern horses fare in mountain passes.”

Teren stepped between them, still favoring his wounded side. “What he means to say is: you let us bleed. Watched the fire grow. Then arrived to pose by the ashes.”

Jareth turned to the captain. “How long were you encamped at Sable Hollow?”

The man hesitated. “Two days. We were ordered to remain until—”

“Until?” Jareth pressed.

A pause.

“Until the outcome was clear.”

Jareth stared at him a long moment, then nodded once. “Then let me be clear. You were not sent to reinforce. You were sent to witness.”

The captain’s smile returned, tight and diplomatic. “The Crown is always grateful when local lords resolve disputes efficiently. It saves... complications.”

Jorund moved past Teren, blade not drawn but hand hovering near the hilt. “Tell your prince,” he said, low and cold, “that next time, we’ll leave a path of bones long enough for even his couriers to follow.”

The captain nodded stiffly, remounted, and gave the order to withdraw. They vanished into the dark as swiftly as they had come.

The fire crackled behind them.

Sarn, seated on a stone with blood still drying on his sleeves, looked up at Jareth. “So,” he said. “Who do we kill next?”

Jareth didn’t answer right away.

He looked at the pass, at the dead, at the distant torchlights retreating into the valley like cowards wrapped in gold.

Then he said, “We let them march. But not alone. We follow in shadow.”

And all around them, the snow kept falling—soft, endless, uncaring.

The next morning broke not with light, but with a deep, muffled stillness. A gray shroud clung to the mountains, and the snow had covered everything—blood, prints, broken blades, and breathless prayers. Only the mounds of freshly turned earth hinted at what had been done.

Sarn buried the dead with his own hands.

No one had asked him to. No one tried to stop him. He moved in silence, sweat steaming from his shoulders, muscles straining beneath a blood-stiff tunic. Shovel, lift, lower. Stone for the head. Repeat. Thornhart and hillfolk alike—he gave them all the same grave. And if anyone spoke, he didn’t answer.

Each time he stood to wipe his brow, he looked toward the ridge.

And each time, his eyes darkened, as if seeing something there that no one else could—something not in the snow or the sky, but behind his own ribs, buried deep and breathing.

Teren watched him from a distance, still pale but steadier now. “He doesn’t believe in gods,” he said quietly to Viremon.

“No,” the whispermaster replied. “But he believes in ghosts.”

Elsewhere in the camp, Jareth stood apart, high on a ledge overlooking the pass. The wind pulled gently at his cloak, the same one soaked in blood only hours ago. In his hand he held the Goldmere letter—creased now, its edges softening from too much reading. He read it again anyway.

Behind him, Jorund approached, boots crunching in the snow.

“Eldenor sent us to bleed,” Jareth said without turning.

“Yes,” Jorund answered. “And we bled.”

Jareth exhaled, slow and thin. “Every time I think we’ve chosen the right path... I see the same result. Death. Lies. A little silence. Then more death.”

“You’re not the only one asking what the hell we’re really doing.”

Jareth turned, his face tired, but his eyes still sharp.

“Maybe we were never meant to change it. Maybe we’re just the blade. Not the hand. Not the mind. Just steel in motion.”

Jorund looked out over the pass, to the graves below.

“Then maybe it’s time we choose who holds the blade.”

Below, Sarn stood by the last grave, head bowed. Snow fell gently on his shoulders, collecting in his hair like dust on a forgotten statue.

Jareth tucked the letter away.

“Let’s find our next fight,” he said. “And make sure it matters.”

As they descended back toward camp, the wind picked up. Behind them, the ridge stood quiet once more, as though nothing had ever happened at all.

A Court of Ash

The walls of Eldenor’s east wing were made of black marble and silence. No birds nested in the eaves, no music lingered in its halls. Only echoes of forgotten oaths and the scent of perfumed rot wafted faintly through the air. In the high chambers reserved for betrothed royals, Lady Serenya Thornhart sat beside a vanity carved from obsidian, her pale hands trembling as she uncorked a small glass vial.

Outside, snow fell in silent sheets, but inside, time had stilled. Her reflection watched her with distant eyes—white-haired, hollow-cheeked, barely the girl who had once sung to pine trees in Frostmark’s valleys. Her fingers curled around the vial, knuckles white. A few drops—just enough. Not enough to raise alarm. Enough to slow the world, to make it stop pressing inward with velvet-covered daggers.

The vial tilted.

She didn’t cry. She had done that already, when no one was watching. What she did now was quiet. Simple. Intentional.

But the vial never reached her lips.

A hand caught hers—firm, gloved in black silk, cold as winter steel.

Startled, Serenya looked up to find a face she did not know. The servant wore no crest, no house colors. Older, eyes like fog over deep water. A woman, though gaunt and sharp-featured like a bird carved in bone.

“You drink that,” the woman said softly, “and he wins.”

Serenya froze. “How did you—?”

“You are watched. Every breath. Every step. But not by all the same eyes.”

“I wasn’t trying to escape,” Serenya whispered. “Not really.”

“I know. That’s why I stopped you.”

The woman took the vial gently, slipping it into the folds of her robe.

“Why?” Serenya asked. “Why would you care?”

“I don’t,” the woman said, with something like pity. “But others do. And you—Lady of the North, Thorn among silk—you are not done. Not yet.”

Serenya blinked, and the woman was already near the door, silent as a dream fading with the dawn.

“Who are you?” she asked, voice trembling.

The woman paused, half in shadow. “A whisper given shape. That’s all anyone in this court can afford to be.”

Then she was gone.

Serenya sat for a long time, staring at her hands. The absence of the vial felt heavier than its weight had ever been.

And for the first time in many weeks, she did not reach for her brush or her mirror. She simply stood, walked to the frost-laced window, and watched the snow fall with open eyes.

The throne room of Eldenor was less a chamber than a stage—vaulted ceilings heavy with carved obsidian, chandeliers flickering like stars trapped in glass, and banners of red and gold draped in practiced grandeur. But beneath the splendor, the court reeked of decay: not of rot or mold, but of power gone too long unchallenged.

Jareth Lythorne stood before the royal council with snow still melting on his shoulders. He made no bow, no pleasantries. His cloak dripped red onto the marble floor—not blood, not this time, but crimson dye from the frost-soaked banner of Coldhearth he had worn through the pass.

The king did not attend. None expected him to. His brother, Lord Chancellor Deren Avall, presided in his place, surrounded by the usual circle of aging advisors, minor lords, and pious flatterers. Prince Jhaeryn was absent too—conveniently.

“I bring proof,” Jareth said, voice clear, eyes burning beneath his wind-tossed hair. “Letters intercepted. Agents killed. Coin from Goldmere delivered to hillfolk rebels. Names written. Orders traced. And your heir—your golden prince—at the heart of it.”

The room stirred, like a nest of coals catching a sudden wind.

Chancellor Avall steepled his fingers. “Strong accusations, Ser Lythorne. And forged parchment is a marketable craft these days.”

Viremon emerged from the shadowed arch behind the council dais, uninvited, unnoticed until now. He carried a single scroll, held in both hands like a priest bearing sacred relics.

“It is not forged,” he said softly. “And it bears the mark of Goldmere’s ciphered vault. I confirmed it myself.”

Several lords shifted in their seats. Lady Ennis of Rivermarch narrowed her eyes. “And what does the letter say, Whispermaster?”

Viremon handed it to her wordlessly.

Jareth turned to the room. “Your prince struck a Thornhart in open court. He delays troops meant to hold the North. He schemes with merchants who’d rather bleed this realm into coin than see it stand free. How long will you pretend it isn’t happening?”

A long pause. Too long.

Then Lord Avall raised a hand. “You’ve delivered your grievance, Ser Lythorne. It will be examined. Quietly.”

Jareth stepped forward. “That letter is a declaration of war.”

Avall’s eyes cooled. “And so is accusing a prince of treason, without the Crown’s consent.”

Silence.

Then Viremon spoke again, voice low but sharp. “You sit atop embers and act as if fire does not spread.”

Avall turned to him slowly. “And what would you have us do, Velvet? Arrest the heir?”

“No,” Viremon said. “But perhaps... *watch him closer* than your own ambition allows.”

Jareth said nothing more. He met the eyes of each councilor in turn, letting them feel his contempt. Then he turned on his heel and strode from the hall, the echo of his boots a drumbeat in the marble silence.

Behind him, whispers bloomed like smoke.

The Whispermaster’s sanctum beneath Eldenor was a hollow carved from the mountain’s roots—silent, lightless but for lanterns of cold blue flame that cast no warmth. Here, the walls were lined not with books but with scrolls bound in silk, knives wrapped in vellum, and masks once worn by men whose names no longer held breath. Secrets slept here. And secrets, Viremon often said, were best kept somewhere colder than a tomb.

Jareth stood with his back to the stone as Viremon moved among his relics like a priest in mourning, slow, deliberate, precise.

“You could’ve crushed him in the council,” Jareth said. “Laid the letter bare, forced their hands. Why hold back now?”

Viremon turned, his face half-lit, half-lost to shadow. “Because this realm is not a wound to cauterize. It is a mirror cracked in ten thousand places. Press too hard, and the whole thing shatters.”

“You think Jhaeryn won’t break it himself?”

“I *know* he will,” Viremon said, quieter now. “But not all at once. He is rot, not flame. His rule will bleed the land dry, not burn it... until it’s too late for anyone to see what was taken.”

Jareth stepped forward, voice tight. “Then why do you stay silent?”

Viremon met his gaze, eyes unreadable. “Because I serve the crown. Not the man. Not the boy who wears it next. I cannot move openly—not without war erupting before the kingdom understands who truly lights the match.”

Jareth frowned. “Then what? You whisper into corners and hope the rot cures itself?”

“I am no healer,” Viremon replied. “Only a scalpel. I cut what I am told. Until then, I listen.”

He moved to a table and unrolled a second scroll—maps, troop movements, trade disputes, names written in delicate ink and slashed through with crimson strokes.

“These are not accidents,” he said. “Jhaeryn places pressure on every fracture point. Goldmere’s debts. Thornhart’s pride. Saltblood’s hunger. All of it... deliberate.”

Jareth ran a hand through his hair, pacing. “And your king does nothing.”

“My king forgets what time it is,” Viremon said softly. “He believes the hour is still peace, still ceremony. But dusk has come. And when the sun sets fully, the boy will be crowned. Then every house will choose—to kneel, to fight, or to fall apart.”

Jareth stared at him for a long moment. “You can’t stop him.”

“No,” Viremon said, with a strange kind of peace in his voice. “But you can.”

Jareth’s jaw tensed. “I’m no spymaster. No kingmaker.”

“No,” Viremon echoed. “You’re a sword.”

And for a moment, in that quiet place of knives and names, the weight of that truth settled over them both.

The Moonlight Gallery of Eldenor was a corridor of mirrors, its arched ceiling traced with silver inlay that shimmered like ice under candlelight. No courtiers wandered here after dusk—not without invitation, and not without cost. Tonight, Lady Selara Lythorne moved through it alone, or so it seemed.

She wore a gown of shadow-green silk, high-necked and flowing, modest by design but daring in how it clung to her like secrets too close to name. The scent of myrrh and crushed

sage trailed in her wake. She was not a seductress by trade—she despised the word—but she knew how to shape desire into utility.

Lord Harwin Vael stood waiting at the gallery's far end, a man of influence and loose scruples, one of the realm's kingmakers in waiting. He controlled coin in three southern holds, votes in the western chamber, and three sons too foolish to inherit anything but scandal. More importantly, he had Jhaeryn's ear—and, if she played her cards correctly, might soon lend it elsewhere.

"Lady Selara," he said, bowing just deep enough to flatter. "You honor me with your company."

"Let's not lie to each other," she said with a smile like a knife's reflection. "You prefer danger to honor. That's why you're here."

They walked slowly down the mirrored hall, reflections multiplying around them—hers poised, his cautious, and all of them watched by unseen eyes behind lattice screens and veiled alcoves.

"You speak boldly," Harwin said. "Most women in court speak in petals and pauses."

"I'm not most women," she replied, stopping just short of him. "And you're not most men. Which is why this conversation will be remembered, or erased. Depending on what you choose next."

His gaze flicked to the doors behind her, then to her face. "What is it you want?"

"Leverage," she said. "Access. Discretion."

She stepped closer.

"And if I'm generous, perhaps something warm to remember when the realm freezes."

Harwin hesitated—but not long.

When they returned to the chamber an hour later, his cravat hung loosely, his confidence tighter. He whispered her name like a prayer into her hair, and she let him believe it mattered.

But as he dressed, Selara moved to the writing desk, pulled open the drawer, and removed the sealed letter he had hidden beneath a false bottom.

A letter addressed to Prince Jhaeryn.

She read it in silence, eyes narrowing.

She let him see none of it. When he turned, she smiled, kissed his cheek, and told him he was the most dangerous man in Eldenor.

And when she left him there, satisfied and unaware, the letter was already tucked into her bodice, and her mind was already calculating the next three moves.

But in the dark behind the gallery mirror, a page lingered a moment too long.

And somewhere deep in the undercourt, Viremon's agents added a new name to a list that had once been short.

They gathered in the Iron Chamber, a smaller war room hidden behind the diplomatic salons of Eldenor—a place where blunt words were spoken without the polish of courtly illusion. The air smelled of oiled steel and ink, the table marked with fresh maps, each bristling with carved tokens like wounds reopened.

Viremon entered first, his robe dusted with sea-salt, eyes shadowed. He placed a single scroll on the table and unrolled it with quiet ceremony.

“They’ve struck again,” he said. “Saltblood raiders, black sails in the fog. A village near Drennport burned. Survivors say the tide carried off livestock, grain... and children.”

Teren let out a long breath. “They swore they’d stopped after the accord last winter.”

“They swore nothing,” Jorund muttered. “They simply stopped long enough to sharpen.”

Jareth studied the map, following the raiders’ path up the coastline. “This is deliberate. They're pushing Dawnspear to retaliate.”

“They won’t just retaliate,” Viremon said. “They’ll mobilize. The council in Rosebarrow has already voted to prepare a defensive levy. If Eldenor doesn’t act, they’ll act alone.”

“That’s the game,” Teren murmured, fingers tapping. “While we stare at Jhaeryn, Saltblood tests the edges. Pull Dawnspear into a coastal war... isolate them from the northern struggle.”

“Divide and devour,” Jareth said. “A strategy as old as bones.”

Sarn leaned forward, expression grim. “And when Dawnspear bleeds, Eldenor will use it as proof the south can’t stand on its own. And Jhaeryn gets to march with 'unity' on his lips.”

“The raiders aren’t just pirates,” Viremon added. “They’re political teeth now. Old kings with young sons and sharper blades.”

Jorund’s gaze dropped to the map. “Then we either let Dawnspear fall into a trap... or we go to war on two fronts.”

“No,” Jareth said. “We do neither.”

He looked up, voice steady. “We expose this. The timing. The manipulation. We show Dawnspear they’re being drawn in—not by Saltblood rage, but by someone else’s ambition.”

Teren gave a bitter laugh. “They won’t listen. Not while the smoke still rises.”

“Then we make them listen,” Jareth said. “We ride to Rosebarrow.”

Viremon nodded. “If Dawnspear marches blind, this realm breaks by spring.”

“And if it doesn’t?” asked Sarn.

“Then we buy ourselves time,” Jareth answered. “Enough to stop what’s coming.”

They all looked at the map again—at the scattered tokens and the lines of salt curling up the coast like veins of fire.

In the court above, laughter drifted faintly through the stone.

But in the Iron Chamber, no one smiled.

The Quiet Betrayal

The manor at Graymere Keep, seat of the Blackfoot line, sat draped in fog, its weathered stone towers looming above the coastal cliffs like relics too proud to fall. Inside, the hearths blazed with southern oak, and servants moved in practiced silence, careful not to linger near closed doors or raised voices. For though it was called a place of leisure, the halls today held tension, old and sharp.

Teren stood before the doors to the council chamber, his cloak still damp from the ride, salt clinging to his boots. The guards stepped aside wordlessly—he still bore the name, after all—and he entered without being announced.

Lord Aedric Blackfoot looked up from a scroll, his expression unreadable beneath a mask of poise and powdered calm. His other sons sat nearby—lesser lords in waiting, not one of them with half Teren’s wit or edge. But they all wore the same thin smiles now.

“Teren,” Aedric said, setting the scroll aside. “Returned from snow and silence to question your elders?”

“I’m here to question *you*,” Teren replied, stepping forward. “And the letters I’ve seen with your seal on shipments bound for Goldmere-held docks.”

A pause fell over the room like frost.

Aedric leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled. “You overstep.”

“No,” Teren said, voice sharpening. “I *see*. I see the funds diverted to merchants who arm rebels. I see the trade concessions disguised as grain contracts. I see your signature—clean, elegant, and very aware of what it buys.”

One of his brothers laughed nervously. “So you’ve become a spy now?”

“I’ve become *useful*,” Teren snapped. “And I’d rather be a bastard with purpose than a noble leeching off treason.”

Aedric rose slowly, the lines in his face deepening. “You forget to whom you speak.”

“I remember,” Teren said. “I remember every time you let loyalty rot in the name of gold. Every time you told me wit was worth less than silence.”

Aedric stepped down from the dais and stopped inches from his son.

“You are no longer of this house,” he said quietly. “You ride with exiles and speak with spies. You are disowned—by name, by right, and by blood.”

Teren’s mouth opened, but no words came. The silence felt colder than the snow he’d left behind.

“Take him out,” Aedric added. “No blade. Just remove the stain.”

The guards moved, but not with violence. Only a firm grip, a silent escort. It was done with dignity—that was always the Blackfoot way.

As the doors closed behind him, Teren did not resist.

But outside, in the misted courtyard, he paused. He touched the signet ring still on his finger, twisted it once, then slid it off.

He did not drop it.

He threw it into the sea.

Then he turned and walked back into the storm he understood far better than the house he had left behind.

The fires in Coldhearth’s great hall burned low, casting long shadows along the walls where the banners of House Thornhart hung stiff in the draught. Jorund stood alone before the high seat, hands at his sides, dust and frost still clinging to his cloak from the long ride back through the mountain pass. He had not been summoned—he had come of his own will, and yet, Lord Kulvar waited as if he’d known this moment would come.

The Thornhart lord sat without his ceremonial cloak, only a heavy wool robe and the steel of his presence keeping the cold from pressing in. His face was unreadable, but there was something measured in his stare, as though weighing a blade before striking.

“You returned,” Kulvar said.

“I always return,” Jorund replied.

The silence between them stretched, father and bastard, mountain and shadow.

“I hear your companions plan to march to Rosebarrow,” Kulvar said at last. “To meddle again in matters that were once left to lords.”

“They plan to keep the realm from breaking.”

“They plan to rewrite it in their image,” Kulvar countered. “Jareth thinks himself a king in exile. Selara poisons chambers with charm. And you—you could be more than their tool.”

Jorund frowned. “Say what you came to say.”

Kulvar rose slowly. “You know the land. You command respect from the men. You are my blood, even if the papers do not say so.” He stepped down from the dais. “The seat can be yours. Thornhart can be yours.”

Jorund narrowed his eyes. “In exchange for what?”

“For standing still,” Kulvar said simply. “For letting fools burn their own maps while we hold the old road. For staying out of wars that do not start with our banners.”

“You want me to let Jareth fall.”

“I want you to let him finish what he started. Without dragging us into the collapse.”

“And Serenya?” Jorund asked, voice low.

“She will marry. She will do her duty.”

Jorund stepped back as if from a blow.

“So I betray those who bled beside me,” he said. “I let the prince marry my sister, let the realm fracture, and I sit in your chair with your name... and no soul left in me?”

“You mistake sacrifice for betrayal,” Kulvar replied.

“No,” Jorund said. “You mistake survival for honor.”

The hall fell still.

“Then leave,” Kulvar said quietly. “And don’t return unless you plan to take the seat by force.”

Jorund turned without another word, boots echoing across the stone.

Behind him, the fire dimmed further.

And in that flickering darkness, Kulvar did not call him back.

By midday, the halls of Coldhearth buzzed with low murmurs—first whispers, then names, then accusation. Jorund made no effort to soften the blow. In the great antechamber outside the council wing, where Thornhart knights and retainers gathered for midday report, he laid the truth bare.

“My father offered me the seat of Thornhart,” he said, voice loud enough to still a dozen conversations. “In exchange for silence. For turning my back on those who’ve fought for this house when it would not fight for itself.”

He tossed a rolled scroll onto the table—a list of intercepted missives, merchant transfers, and troop delay orders that had passed through Coldhearth's own scribes. "These orders were meant to keep us still while Goldmere, Saltblood, and Eldenor grind the realm apart."

Gasps, then silence.

Jorund met the gaze of every man and woman in the room. "I won't wear a name that buys peace with complicity. Not while my blood is traded for coin."

From the far end of the chamber, a bootstep cracked across the stone. Eryk Thornhart, clad in black-and-silver mail, stepped forward, his face carved from something colder than disdain.

"You speak of betrayal," Eryk said, voice sharp, "but walk the halls like a crow crying doom and pride. You shame our house in front of common blades and outsiders."

"I speak truth," Jorund answered.

"You speak like a bastard hoping to crown himself noble." Eryk drew his sword and pointed it at the floor between them. "Then prove it."

The room went still.

"A duel," Eryk declared. "Before the hearth. Old ways. House justice."

Jorund didn't hesitate. "Accepted."

They met within the hour. The keep's lower hall was cleared of tables, snow tracked in by boots now melting into muddy rivulets. The old hearth blazed behind them, a witness to the blood to come.

Jareth arrived late, silent and unsmiling. Sarn leaned against the wall, arms crossed. Teren watched with a grimace, one hand pressed to his healing wound. Viremon stood farther back, eyes unreadable.

No lords presided. Only swords.

Eryk fought like a Thornhart—measured, practiced, cold. Jorund fought like a man who had carried steel longer than he'd spoken his father's name aloud. They clashed, blade to blade, steel ringing against old stone and firelight. Eryk landed the first cut—Jorund the second.

Then came the turning stroke.

Eryk overreached, pressing too hard, and Jorund stepped into him, caught his blade under a rising parry, and swept it aside. A heartbeat later, Eryk was on the floor, Jorund's blade at his throat.

The room waited.

"Do it," Eryk hissed. "Take what you want."

But Jorund stepped back, lowered his sword, and turned his back on him.

“I already have,” he said.

The silence that followed was not empty. It was full of something sharper than applause.

It was respect.

The blade hovered for only a moment—but in Coldhearth, a moment could shape legacies.

Jorund’s sword trembled faintly in his grip as he stood over his half-brother, the fire behind them casting long shadows across the stone. Eryk’s breath steamed into the air, jaw clenched, eyes defiant even in defeat. He would not beg. Thornharts never begged. Not even to bastards.

Jorund looked down—not at Eryk, but at the blood on the blade, his own knuckles bruised and raw. And then, slowly, he stepped back.

“No,” he said. “I will not kill my kin to prove I belong.”

He turned to face the gathered onlookers—knights, retainers, courtiers, even servants who’d crept in from the shadows. None spoke. Not yet.

“I fought because this house deserves better,” Jorund said. “Not because I want a throne. I will not inherit power by spilling more blood on stone already slick with it.”

He tossed his sword to the ground beside Eryk’s fallen blade.

“I am Thornhart in deed, if not in name,” he said. “And I will not need your chair to be heard.”

No one applauded.

But no one looked away.

Lord Kulvar had watched from the upper gallery, silent, his face unreadable. He did not descend. He did not speak. But he did not leave, either.

Eryk remained on the floor, stunned less by pain than by the mercy he did not expect. When two guards moved to help him stand, he shrugged them off. Stood on his own.

He would not thank Jorund.

But he would never call him bastard again.

Later, as dusk fell over the snowbound keep, Jorund sat alone beneath the watchtower, a cup of hot mead in hand. Sarn joined him without a word, sitting beside him on the stone ledge.

“Could’ve ended him,” the dwarf said. “Would’ve been cleaner.”

“I’m done with clean kills,” Jorund replied. “They don’t clean anything.”

Sarn grunted. “You’re a strange man.”

“Strange enough to survive here.”

From the windows above, the banners of Coldhearth hung motionless, but something beneath them had shifted. Not the stones. Not the laws.

The silence.

It no longer ignored Jorund.

It listened.

The east library of Eldenor was rarely visited at night—its hearths burned low, and its corridors were too narrow for gossip to comfortably travel. But Lady Serenya found solace there. Between forgotten codices and the scent of dry ink, no one expected her to perform. She could sit in silence, unnoticed, unread.

Until Viremon stepped from the stacks without a sound.

“You’ve stopped singing,” he said.

“I no longer feel like a melody,” she replied, not startled. “Only an echo.”

He took a seat across from her without invitation, folding his dark robes as he sat, eyes catching candlelight like distant embers.

“You nearly drank death,” he said softly.

“And you nearly let me.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

She studied him. “Then why are you here now?”

“Because your pain has purpose. But it needs direction. You’ve been trying to sway power with feeling. That works in song, not in court.”

“And you’re here to teach me courtcraft?”

“No,” Viremon said. “I’m here to listen.”

She looked down at the notes in front of her—poems abandoned halfway, ideas scratched into the margins of state papers. Not rebellion. Not yet. But something alive beneath the surface.

“You read my letters,” she said. “You knew I was desperate.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “And now you’re angry. That’s better.”

Serenya leaned back, gaze sharpening. “You want something.”

“I want to stop a war before it crowns a monster.”

“Then use your spies. Your knives.”

“They’re already in play,” he said. “But blades frighten the court. Words? Spoken by a victim, a sister, a woman wronged—those can *haunt* it.”

She held his gaze. “You want me to become the face of resistance.”

“No,” he said. “I want you to become the voice that whispers when everyone else is shouting. That’s what changes minds here. Not force. *Doubt.*”

For a long moment, she said nothing.

Then she reached for a scroll, unrolling it slowly. “I’ve been writing down everything. Who visits Jhaeryn. What they bring. What they leave with. He thinks I’ve been broken.”

“And have you?” Viremon asked.

She smiled faintly. “No. I’ve been listening.”

Viremon nodded. “Good. The realm needs fewer singers. And more echoes that know how to answer back.”

As he vanished once more into the stacks, Serenya dipped her quill again, ink trailing a line across new parchment. No verse this time.

Just names.

And truths.

Bonds of Smoke

The winter fog clung to Rosebarrow Keep like an old lie—thick, cloying, unwilling to lift. Smoke from the hearths curled lazily into the sky, mingling with the mist until the towers disappeared into a pale veil. The walls were the same. The gates creaked as they always had. But something beneath the stone had shifted. The party returned not as a band of emissaries, but as survivors. And survivors carried ghosts.

They rode through the gates in silence, their cloaks damp, their faces drawn. Coldhearth’s fires still clung to their boots, the Crimson Pass still sang in their bones. Inside, courtiers offered polite nods and practiced smiles, but few met their eyes directly. Even among allies, uncertainty had settled like frost.

Jareth dismounted first, handing the reins to a groom without a word. He looked up at the keep, then over his shoulder at the others. “We don’t speak freely here,” he said. “Not until we know who still listens with clean ears.”

Teren rubbed his shoulder, still stiff from the arrow wound, and muttered, “And not until we know who’s still bought.”

Jorund stepped through the gate behind them, his eyes already sweeping the courtyard. Some of the soldiers bowed. Others didn’t. It told him more than words.

Sarn said nothing, but his axe hung a little lower on his back, not out of exhaustion—but expectation. He looked at the guards the way a wolf looks at a chained rival, already weighing how tight the collar is.

Viremon had arrived before them, as always, and now emerged from the shadows of the inner hall as if conjured by thought. “Rooms are prepared. Fires lit. Food tastes of dust.”

“You sound optimistic,” Jareth said.

“I’m alive,” Viremon replied. “I’ll try not to make it a habit.”

They convened in the old map room—an unadorned chamber with high windows and a battered oak table scored from a dozen years of strategy and failure. As the door closed behind them, a silence settled—not peaceful, but wary.

“Do we know where Selara stands?” Jorund asked.

Teren laughed, humorless. “Where the wind favors her, as always. But she's moved her game closer to the crown. She may be gambling higher than she can afford.”

“And Dawnspear?” Sarn asked. “Have they taken the bait yet?”

Jareth pulled off his gloves and laid them on the table. “They’ve armed. Not marched. But it’s coming.”

Viremon stepped to the window, watching the fog curl against the stone. “We are surrounded by smoke. Allies who speak in half-truths. Enemies who smile first. And the court itself shifting beneath our feet.”

“And us?” Teren asked. “What are *we*, then?”

For a moment, no one answered.

Then Jorund spoke, voice like slow thunder. “We’re the only ones who don’t want to rule.”

That, more than anything, made them dangerous.

It was just before midnight when the news reached them—word carried on the wind by a Frostmark scout who had ridden through smoke and frost with black in his eyes. A village south of the pass, barely more than a string of thatch-roof homes clinging to a frozen creek,

had been raided. Not by hillfolk or bandits, but by men wearing cloaks stripped of heraldry—burned, bloodstained, faceless.

Among the names of the dead, buried in the trembling voice of the scout, was a child. Nella. Brown curls. Laughter like water. Sarn had pulled her from a burning cart two years past after a border skirmish—tucked her into a hay wagon and threatened the gods themselves if they dared take her then. He'd left her with a family and coin to spare.

She hadn't made it out this time.

Sarn said nothing when he heard. Just stood in the corner of the map room, staring at the wall, his fists clenched tight at his sides. No curse. No roar. Just a silence too deep to fill.

Later, long after the others had drifted to cold beds or restless patrols, Teren found him alone in the old armory. Sarn sat on a crate, shoulders hunched, hands resting on his knees. One of them was shaking.

"She was eight," he muttered. "Couldn't hold a sword. Could barely hold a goat still. I told her she'd be safe."

Teren eased down beside him, slowly. He didn't speak at first, just reached into his coat and pulled a flask free, offering it without a word.

Sarn took it, drank deep, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You lose enough," he said, staring ahead, "and you forget how much each one still cuts. Thought I was past that. Thought..."

His voice cracked. It wasn't loud. But it was worse than any roar he'd ever given.

Teren didn't tell him it wasn't his fault. He didn't say Nella was just one of many or that she wouldn't want him to hurt. He knew those words would only turn to ash. Instead, he said the one thing that had meaning left.

"She mattered to you."

Sarn nodded, just once. A sharp jerk, like he was holding something in his throat.

"Then she's not lost," Teren said. "Not really."

They sat in silence for a long time.

No swords drawn. No blood spilled.

Just two men—one broken, one breaking—held together by the quiet truth that grief, too, could be shared.

The banners of Rosebarrow Keep hung limp in the still air, and yet the tournament grounds bustled with sound—cheers from the gallery, the clash of wood on steel, the sharp crack of hooves on frost-hardened soil. It was theater, carefully timed and loudly staged. With

Dawnspear’s levies mustering and rumors of Saltblood raids spreading like fire in dry fields, the court had demanded spectacle. A tournament to prove all was well. A contest to distract from the scent of war.

Jareth had not volunteered. He had simply been expected.

He stood in the armorer’s tent, bare-chested, lacing his gambeson with slow fingers. The hum of the crowd drifted through the canvas. Somewhere, coin changed hands. Somewhere, alliances shifted beneath the flags of sport. He knew the game.

“You don’t have to do this,” Jorund said, leaning in the entrance, arms folded.

“I do,” Jareth replied. “They need blood. Better mine than theirs. Better show than truth.”

His opponent was Ser Alden Tyreth, the Hammer of Westvale—ten years undefeated in the lists, a mountain of a man wrapped in gilded mail and pride. The crowd adored him. Lords feared him. He was a symbol of strength. The perfect opponent.

And the perfect distraction.

The horn blew.

Jareth stepped into the arena to scattered applause—respectful, cautious. Not beloved, but watched. The prince’s shadow hung over the crowd. Everyone knew why this duel had been arranged: to remind the realm that power still wore a smile.

The first pass was thunder and dust. Alden's lance shattered against Jareth’s shield, nearly toppling him from the saddle. Jareth’s lance struck true but glanced off a reinforced pauldron.

The second pass, Jareth angled low, and Alden’s helm rang like a bell, drawing gasps.

On the third pass, there was no impact—Alden feinted, wheeled, and dismounted with surprising grace. The crowd roared. Swordplay now. Closer. Personal.

They met in the center of the ring, blades drawn, steel kissing steel in a flurry of sparks and hard breath. Alden struck like a smith—heavy, relentless. Jareth danced like fire—light, quick, inevitable.

For ten long minutes they traded blows.

Then, with a sudden pivot, Jareth let Alden overextend, caught his arm beneath a twist of the blade, and dropped him hard to the ground. The crowd stilled.

Jareth placed his sword at Alden’s throat.

“I yield,” the knight said, voice gravel.

Jareth nodded and lowered the blade. He turned to the gallery—not to bow, not to smile, but to *look*.

At the prince's empty seat.

At the nobles who whispered behind fans and goblets.

At the realm pretending not to unravel.

He raised his sword—not in triumph, but in reminder.

And the crowd, unsure whether to cheer or worry, chose both.

The lanterns of Rosebarrow's east garden swayed softly in the wind, casting pale halos through the mist. Selara moved through the hedgerows with the ease of a woman who belonged in every room yet trusted none. She had left the feast early, claiming headache, and her absence was quickly filled with speculation. She liked it that way. Let them whisper in her shadow.

But tonight, the whispers found her first.

She was not alone in the garden.

The figure emerged from the shadows beneath a frost-bitten arbor, robed in black, face veiled by a half-mask of silver etched with ivy. The mask was not unfamiliar—Viremon's agents sometimes wore them when delivering truths that should not echo. But this was not one of his shadows. This one moved like a woman and carried herself like a threat.

"Lady Lythorne," the figure said, her voice calm, cool, and entirely sure of itself. "You wear secrets like perfume. But even the finest fade."

Selara did not flinch. "If this is meant to unsettle me, you'll have to try harder."

The woman stepped forward, the crunch of gravel soft beneath her boots. She held a folded letter, sealed in blue wax—no crest, no sigil, just the mark of silence.

"Your children," the woman said, handing it over. "Their father's name is whispered in the wrong halls."

Selara took the letter slowly, fingers steady, heart not.

"You're bluffing."

"No," said the woman. "I'm warning you."

Selara broke the seal. Inside were three names—one true, two fakes—and a note scrawled in a hand she recognized from old debts. *They know. And they will use it. Be ready.*

She folded the letter again and slipped it into her sleeve.

"Why tell me?" Selara asked. "If they know, why not expose me?"

“Because it’s more useful to watch you squirm,” the woman said. “Or perhaps to remind you—bastards can’t stay hidden forever. Not when crowns are involved.”

Selara stepped closer, eyes narrowing. “If you’re trying to blackmail me, I suggest a more cautious tone.”

“I’m not,” the woman replied. “But others will. And soon.”

With that, she vanished into the mist, leaving no name, no sound, only a trail of cold wind and the faintest scent of yew.

Selara stood alone for a long moment, hand on her sleeve.

She had known this day would come. But not so soon. Not while her pieces were still moving across the board.

She turned back toward the keep, her jaw set.

If the game had changed, so would she.

And gods help whoever thought to use her children as leverage.

The messenger arrived at dusk, just as the last light slipped behind the towers of Rosebarrow Keep. Clad in mottled gray and black, the sigil of the Ravenborn House stitched in silver thread at his collar, he rode with neither escort nor ceremony—only speed and purpose. His mount steamed in the courtyard, flecked with mud and foam, as the gates closed behind him with a weighty clang.

Jareth was the first to meet him. The others followed quickly, drawn by the urgency that clung to the rider like frost.

The man dismounted and dropped to one knee, offering a sealed missive bound in dark velvet and branded with the Crest of Crownspire—black flame on white stone. The seal of the king.

“From the Ravenborn emissary at Crownspire,” the messenger said, voice hoarse from the wind. “His Grace calls the banners.”

A hush fell.

Teren took a step back, face paling. “That’s no drill. That’s the signal.”

Sarn crossed his arms, frowning. “The old king hasn’t called the banners in a decade. Last time, two hundred men didn’t come home.”

Jorund took the scroll from Jareth’s hand, eyes scanning the contents. His jaw clenched.

“It’s not just a call,” he said. “It’s a purge. Crownspire means to bring order. By force.”

Viremon appeared beside them without sound, already reading over Jorund’s shoulder. “The language is careful, but unmistakable. They intend to march north to ‘restore unity.’”

“Unity by conquest,” Jareth murmured.

Teren looked around. “Who answers first?”

“Dawnspear will hesitate,” Jorund said. “They won’t yield to the Crown without knowing how the wind turns. Frostmark may fight. Goldmere... will sell to whoever pays fastest.”

“And Coldhearth?” Sarn asked.

Jorund didn’t answer.

Above them, the bell tower rang once—an echo rolling across the keep like a funeral note.

Selara joined them in the courtyard a moment later, her eyes finding the seal in Jareth’s hand.

“So,” she said, her voice smooth as ever, “the storm arrives.”

Jareth nodded. “It does.”

She looked up at the darkening sky, where the first stars blinked through a veil of cloud.

“Then let’s make sure we choose the battlefield.”

And far away, beneath the towers of Crownspire, the black-flamed banners of the king were unfurled to the wind—calling lords to war.

The March South

The halls of Rosebarrow echoed with tension—metal against stone, boots against frost-slick floors, voices low but edged like drawn blades. News from Crownspire spread like smoke: the king’s banners were raised, his legates riding hard to every holdfast and court, summoning allegiance under threat of punishment. War no longer whispered. It had begun to speak.

In the war chamber, beneath a canopy of aged flags and dust-thick chandeliers, the high lords gathered—Blackmoor, Thornhart, Dawnspear, and the lesser bannermen caught between loyalty and survival. A map of the eastern realms lay spread across the table, red tokens clustered near Eldenor, and a fresh ink line drawn southward from Crownspire like a blade coming to claim.

Jareth stood at the head of the table, flanked by Jorund on his right, Selara on his left. Sarn lingered near the hearth, arms folded, silent. Teren leaned against the wall, reading every face and twitch with sharp-eyed amusement tinged with dread. Viremon, unseen but present, listened from the shadows.

“We do not march,” Lord Kulvar Thornhart said, voice heavy with finality. “Not until Frostmark’s rights are named. Not until this war promises more than southern chains wrapped in royal silk.”

Blackmoor's envoy, a lean woman with steel-threaded braids and sharp eyes, nodded in agreement. "Our steel holds the mountain passes. Our coin keeps the frontier fed. We do not answer summons while our neighbors are insulted in court and our allies offered nothing but commands."

Dawnspear's young lord bristled. "Refusal may be seen as rebellion."

Jorund stepped forward, placing both hands on the edge of the table. "Then let them see it. We will not carry the Crown's banners until we know whether this is justice or ambition dressed in law."

Selara's voice followed, cool and smooth. "What is loyalty worth when it is demanded, not earned? If the Crown wishes the North to follow, it must prove it still serves the realm—not just itself."

The chamber grew quiet.

Jareth looked around the table, meeting each gaze in turn.

"We have fought for unity," he said. "Bled for peace. But we will not kneel for pretense. We will not march until Frostmark is named in treaty, until Thornhart's seat is respected, and until the north is promised more than graves."

A murmur of agreement spread.

One of Dawnspear's advisors frowned. "And if the Crown refuses?"

"Then we stand alone," Jorund said. "But not bowed."

From the hearth, Sarn spoke at last, voice low. "We hold. We watch. We strike only when we choose."

Viremon stepped from the shadows, setting a fresh missive on the table.

"Then we begin the real work," he said. "Not of swords—but of smoke and names."

Outside, the banners did not yet fall. But neither did they rise.

And in the stillness before the march, the north grew sharper, quieter, more dangerous with every breath.

The snow had not yet thawed, but the roads were stirring with the breath of war. Messages galloped between holds faster than the wind, and old roads once used for trade now whispered the tread of marching feet. The realm was waking—and with it, the lines between friend and foe hardened like frost into stone.

In Rosebarrow's outer courtyard, the party stood in their winter gear, packs strapped, weapons cleaned. The mood was not solemn, but sharp. Each knew their path was a gambit, and the stakes had grown beyond banners and borders.

“We split here,” Jareth said, tightening the clasp on his cloak. “Blackmoor listens to strength dressed in civility. Selara and I speak their language.”

“You’ll need to offer more than titles,” Jorund said. “Blackmoor remembers wars longer than their treaties.”

Selara adjusted her gloves, her smile thin and controlled. “That’s why I’m going. I know what they value. Power without arrogance. Deals without oaths. And the promise that if they stand with us, they won’t stand alone when the Crown calls for retribution.”

Jareth nodded. “We remind them who bled at the pass. Who held the mines when Eldenor looked away. We don’t plead. We show.”

Jorund slung his pack over one shoulder and turned to Sarn, who was already checking the edge of his axe with a frown. “Saltmere won’t speak to envoys. They respect grit, not parchment.”

“They respect who’s still alive after walking into their camps,” Sarn muttered. “Which is why we don’t bring a scribe.”

“You’ll bring proof,” Viremon said, handing Jorund a small bundle of scrolls. “Goldmere’s movements. Crownspire’s silence. And the letter that shows Saltblood was meant to burn, not just raid.”

“They’ll still want blood,” Sarn said. “But maybe they’ll aim it the right way.”

Teren stepped forward, arms crossed. “And what of me? Shall I serenade Dawnspear into reason with wounded pride and broken ribs?”

“You’ll remain here,” Selara said, turning to him. “Dawnspear still listens at Rosebarrow’s walls. You’ve charm enough to learn what the banners don’t say. Charm and cynicism—rare in this keep.”

Teren gave a mock bow. “Flattery from a Lythorne? Now I’m truly marked for death.”

Jareth turned to the group, one last glance passing over each face. “We ride in different directions. But our aim is the same. We bring this realm back from the brink—or we make sure we choose the battlefield when it falls.”

Without further word, the party broke apart.

Jareth and Selara rode west, into the cold shadow of Blackmoor’s stone-clad hills.

Jorund and Sarn turned north, toward the salt-bitten winds and blood-washed coast.

Behind them, Rosebarrow stood still—for now. But the storm that followed them had only just begun.

Saltmere was as gray and unwelcoming as memory allowed—a city crouched beneath storm-heavy skies, where gulls screamed louder than bells and the wind smelled always of brine,

blood, and old rust. Saltblood colors hung limp from the spires, and every alley whispered violence. Here, trust was earned not by titles, but by surviving long enough to be noticed.

Jorund and Sarn passed through the gates under the guise of neutral envoys, but suspicion followed them like a hound. Saltmere's dock-worn guards watched them with narrowed eyes, hands always near hilts. They made for the central market—where news traveled faster than ships and where a man could be murdered before his coin hit the ground.

It was there, amid crates of dried eels and shivering couriers, that the trouble found them.

The priest came robed in black sailcloth, hair bound with salt-twine, the mark of the Tidemothers inked into his throat. He moved like a pilgrim, but his approach was too direct, too confident. Sarn saw him first and reacted as he always did—with instinct and steel.

He slammed the priest against a fish-cart before the man could speak, axe half-raised.

"Say your prayers fast," Sarn growled, "and I might send you to your gods whole."

The priest choked but did not resist. "I bring a message—!"

"You wear Saltblood ink and move like a knife. I should open you and read it inside."

"*From Eldenor's enemies,*" the priest gasped. "I bring word not from Saltmere—but against it."

That gave Jorund pause. He stepped forward, resting a hand on Sarn's arm. "Let him speak."

Sarn didn't release him, but he loosened his grip enough for the priest to breathe.

The man coughed, adjusting his torn robe. "There is a movement beneath the sea-lords. Not all support the raids. Not all are blind to the Crown's games. I carry a ciphered scroll—meant only for those who still resist Jhaeryn's poison."

He reached into his robes—slowly, deliberately—and withdrew a wax-sealed parchment marked not with Saltblood's sigil, but with a black sun over broken waves.

Jorund took it, studied it, nodded once. "Ravenborn faction. Old southern dissidents."

"They reach for allies beyond the coast," the priest said. "And they know who bleeds in the North."

Sarn lowered his axe but didn't sheath it. "You come with too many shadows."

"I come with warning," the priest said. "Jhaeryn sends Goldmere agents to Saltmere now—under banners of grain and coin. They will buy the loudest voices first. The rest, they'll drown."

Jorund looked at Sarn. "We need to bring this to the Sea-Lords directly."

Sarn scowled. "They won't like that we manhandled their priest."

“Then we’ll tell them the truth,” Jorund said. “We nearly killed a spy. Turns out he brought a mirror.”

The priest bowed once and vanished into the crowd like ink in water.

Sarn spat onto the stone and muttered, “Next time, wear less robe and more warning.”

They continued on, parchment in hand, toward Saltmere’s war hall—where loyalties would be tested not by promises, but by what they feared most:

Being left behind.

The archives of Rosebarrow were buried deep beneath the keep, built into the foundation centuries ago by scribes who believed ink should sleep beneath stone. Few visited. Fewer were permitted entry. But Teren Blackfoot had never cared for permission—only access.

By candlelight and bribed silence, he poured over tomes lined with dust and wax-sealed letters left unopened for decades. Records of noble births, chamber ledgers, even court physician logs. He read not as a scholar, but as a thief—stealing truth from history one sentence at a time.

He wasn’t even sure what he was looking for, not exactly. Just a sense, a whisper seeded by Selara’s stolen letter, by Viremon’s veiled doubts, by the uneasy way the king never spoke Jhaeryn’s name in council chambers.

Then he found it.

A birthing record, buried in the ledgers of Eldenor’s inner court, dated eighteen years past. The king’s son—stillborn. A second entry, four days later, under an alias. The same midwife. The same chamber. But a different mother. One not of the queen’s court, but of the southern fringe. Her name was struck through. The infant listed as “transferred for royal guardianship.”

Teren sat back, blood gone cold.

He found more. A physician’s journal, brief but damning: *“The queen does not weep. She never held him. The child in the nursery is not hers.”*

It all fell together now—the king’s slow fading, Jhaeryn’s rise, the sudden silence around royal lineage. They’d hidden it well, but not from time. Not from ink. Not from someone looking hard enough.

Jhaeryn was not the king’s son.

He was an orphan raised in the chamber of princes. A fiction made flesh. A lie crowned in silk.

Teren rose, scrolls bundled beneath his coat. He extinguished the candle and slipped into the corridor, boots silent, heart thundering. As he passed beneath the carved sigil of House Eldenor—the burning crown—he muttered to himself, half in awe, half in dread.

“No wonder he’s so eager to rule. He knows the throne was never his to inherit... only to take.”

And with that truth in hand, the war ceased to be about pride or power.

It became about legitimacy.

And whether the realm would still bleed for a ghost in a prince’s cloak.

The realm no longer murmured—it roared.

From Dawnspear’s sea-battered cliffs to the frost-wrapped gates of Coldhearth, riders galloped day and night bearing sigils old and new. Seals were broken. Swords were drawn. Oaths, once cold with time, were kindled anew—or shattered in silence. The lie of peace had held like thin glass. Now it cracked.

In Eldenor, the palace guard tripled overnight. The corridors brimmed with veiled messengers, veiled threats, and wine sweetened with fear. Prince Jhaeryn no longer smiled in public. He did not need to. His banners were already raised beyond the city walls, black and crimson flapping against skies swollen with storm.

In the crypts beneath Rosebarrow, Teren laid the truth before Viremon and Selara—the journal, the birth records, the physician’s trembling hand. Neither spoke for a long time.

“This,” Viremon said finally, “is the blade beneath the throne.”

“And it cuts both ways,” Selara murmured. “If we show this too soon, we fracture the lords. If we wait too long…”

“He is crowned in shadow,” Teren said. “But he believes it light.”

Northward, in Saltmere, Jorund stood before the Sea-Lords with the Ravenborn message clutched in his fist. Sarn flanked him, bloody and silent, the weight of their journey still etched across his face.

“You say the prince buys blood,” one of the old lords rasped. “Why should we not sell it?”

“Because you won’t own the price,” Jorund answered. “You’ll be next.”

Saltmere would not declare that day. But its sails would not rise against Frostmark either.

Farther west, in Blackmoor, Selara and Jareth stood before an aging count whose sons all bore scars from the last war. He listened without interruption, read the scroll in silence, and finally said, “If the prince is false, then the war is holy.”

In every court, the line began to draw.

And in the heart of Eldenor, Serenya Thornhart—no longer a girl, no longer a pawn—penned a letter in her own hand, addressed not to Jhaeryn, but to every noble widow and wary regent who had ever wondered if the Crown still protected its own.

You are not alone, it read. *You are simply quiet. And the silence ends now.*

By the end of the week, Crownspire's towers glowed with the fires of mobilization. Steel was forged. Allies declared. Borders closed.

Civil war had not yet begun.

But it had been named.

Fire and Rain

The siege began not with trumpet or charge, but with silence—and then fire.

At dawn, the rain came down in slanting sheets, drenching the banners before they could be fully raised. Mist clung to the valleys, curling between the ridges like smoke not yet born, and the towers of Crownspire loomed through it like the bones of some sleeping giant.

The city had closed its gates three days prior. No envoys allowed. No parley offered. Jhaeryn had withdrawn into his fortress with his guard, his loyal bannermen, and whatever truths he still thought could protect him.

Outside the walls, the realm had gathered.

To the north, on the rocky slopes overlooking the river approach, Thornhart and Blackmoor stood shoulder to shoulder—gray and green banners rippling in the storm. Jorund rode the line at first light, his cloak sodden, his voice a low rumble beneath the hiss of rain.

"Hold the ridge. Watch the treelines. No one comes through without bleeding."

Behind him, the Thornhart soldiers stood grim and ready. They did not sing. They did not chant. They waited, axes in hand, shields slick with rain, forged for frost but ready for fire.

Beside them, Blackmoor knights polished their armor in near-silence. Their captains whispered orders without flair, their longbows covered beneath oilskin. Precision was their pride, not drama.

Jareth arrived just after sunrise, his armor dulled for the weather, his eyes scanning the distant gates. He joined Jorund beneath a crag of black stone, and for a moment, they said nothing.

"They've barricaded the merchant quarter," Jorund said. "Pulled the outer civilians behind the second ring. He plans to burn the space between."

Jareth nodded. "A delay. Nothing more."

"Delays cost lives."

Jareth glanced sideways. "We can't bleed them into martyrdom. He wants that."

Jorund's jaw tightened. "He'll get a grave instead."

To the west, Dawnspear prepared the assault ladder corps. South of the walls, the Saltblood detachment harried supply lines. Viremon's agents had already silenced three signal towers before the first arrow was loosed.

But here, on the northern flank, it was waiting that defined the first day.

And in that waiting, beneath the steady hammer of rain, the old houses of the North stood unbending.

Not for glory.

Not even for vengeance.

But for truth.

For once, it was enough.

Within the walls of Crownspire, the air reeked of ash and fear. The city that once rang with bells and silk-shoed courtiers now choked on barricades and boiling pitch. The gates had closed not just to enemies—but to truth. And within those stone halls, locked in a tower meant more for decorum than defense, Serenya Thornhart made her escape.

She had not begged. She had not screamed. She had waited.

Two days before the siege began, the guards changed. One new man—too young, too nervous—brought her bread with shaking hands. He didn't meet her eyes. But he wore his belt too high, and his boots too tight. She spoke kindly. Then firmly. Then with a promise that if he looked the other way for ten minutes, he'd have coin to buy new boots and a future to wear them in.

He looked the other way.

Now, with the towers under watch and the outer city burning in sections, Serenya slipped into the servants' quarter where the smoke gathered low and the walls whispered of old paths.

The civilians huddled in the granary below the south wing—wounded, starved, forgotten. A boy with a splinted leg. A woman with a broken arm and no voice. A baker who had lost both sons to the first fire in the merchant district. They did not ask who she was.

They followed her because she moved without fear.

"I know a way out," she said. "Not safe. Not short. But better than waiting for fire."

Beneath the tower, behind a crumbling wine cellar, lay the tunnel her nurse had once spoken of in hushed bedtime stories—built for queens who feared crowds, lined with dust and old spider's silk, untouched for decades.

She pushed open the hatch with scraped fingers and led them through.

They moved in darkness, torches wrapped in cloth, light dimmed to a whisper. The stone trembled above them as siege engines groaned into place. Somewhere behind, walls cracked, and voices rose in panic.

Serenya never stopped moving.

Half a mile beneath the city, they emerged at the base of a ravine hidden by bramble and mist. A narrow trail led toward the eastern valley, where no army yet marched.

She turned to the small band behind her—less than twenty, all wounded, all scared.

“You don’t owe me thanks,” she said, breathless. “Just keep going. Don’t look back.”

They nodded. They obeyed.

As they vanished into the trees, Serenya sat on a flat stone, the wind slicking her white hair across her cheeks. Her dress was torn, her hands bloodied. But her eyes burned.

Not with fear.

With resolve.

She wasn’t done.

Not yet.

Selara moved through Crownspire’s outer court like a rumor dressed in silk—half seen, never heard, and always two steps from consequence. The siege had not yet broken the palace walls, but fear had already slipped inside. Courtiers shuffled with forced grace, their smiles tighter, their voices more careful. Selara thrived among such people. In their panic, they became predictable.

She wore mourning black, veil drawn just enough to shade her face. Whispers said she had come to mourn the realm. In truth, she was here to carve it.

Her target was Lord Tamber Vale, a minor baron with too much access and not enough discretion. He drank with the guards, flirted with the steward’s wife, and—more importantly—held a sigil granting passage into the royal wing. Jhaeryn trusted him, though not enough to give him command. Only errands.

Selara found him alone in the velvet alcove beside the red chamber, his cup already half full and his ego overbrimming.

“My lady,” he drawled. “Even the storm does not dim your radiance.”

“And yet you drink alone,” she replied, seating herself beside him. “A shame, truly. I was hoping for better company.”

He smiled like a boy in a borrowed coat. “Then stay.”

She poured him another glass, her ringed finger brushing his. He did not notice the powdered trace on her nail, nor the bitter edge to the wine. He drank quickly, thinking it conquest.

Within minutes, his words slurred.

“Strange,” he mumbled. “I feel... quite heavy...”

“That's the weight of importance,” Selara said, taking the sigil from his belt as he slumped sideways, drool wetting the silk. “You’ve finally done something useful.”

He did not respond.

She tucked the sigil into her sleeve and stepped into the corridor, her pace calm, precise. Two guards outside the royal wing nodded as she passed, eyes on the silver seal she raised. Neither questioned her. She was Lady Selara of House Lythorne. She belonged wherever power gathered.

Within minutes, she crossed the threshold into the royal chamber—a high-walled sanctum draped in banners and shadow. The throne stood empty. The prince had not slept here in days. But she didn’t come for his presence.

She came for what he left behind.

Letters. Maps. The ledger of his reach.

She moved quickly, methodically, her gloved hands rifling through a chest beneath the sigil banner of the Crown. There—scrolls bearing the seal of Goldmere, receipts from Ravenborn agents, and, tucked deep beneath a velvet lining, a coded list of those promised titles *after* the realm was “secured.”

She slipped the documents into her satchel, turned once toward the cold throne, and whispered:

“Enjoy your reign, Jhaeryn. While it lasts.”

Then she vanished from the chamber like smoke from a snuffed candle.

The north courtyard of Crownspire was a battlefield by design—broad, open, lined with statues of forgotten kings who had ruled through iron and legend. Now it served as a crucible, soaked in rain, ash, and the blood of those who challenged the prince’s will. And at its center, Jareth Lythorne faced Ser Garrik Maul.

Maul had been the Crown’s dog for years—huge, brutal, wrapped in tarnished plate and the reputation of a man who won not by skill but by refusal to fall. He was loyalty sharpened into cruelty, and Jhaeryn had sent him out like a wolf before the gates could fall.

“Yield now,” Maul growled, circling. “And you’ll live long enough to see your house burn.”

“I’ve seen enough fire,” Jareth replied, drawing steel. “I came for the ash.”

The rain slicked the cobblestones, but neither man hesitated. Maul struck first—wide, powerful arcs meant to break shield and bone. Jareth ducked, weaved, letting the bigger man overcommit, his own blade dancing low and fast, scoring sparks from Maul's armor.

The crowd—soldiers, deserters, spies—watched in breathless silence. No herald called the duel. No horns announced it. Just metal, breath, and thunder.

Maul landed a blow to Jareth's shoulder, sending him reeling. The pain screamed down his arm, but he gritted his teeth and twisted away, slashing upward. The edge caught Maul's helm, slicing through leather to the skin beneath. Blood followed, hot and fast.

The knight laughed.

"Thought you'd be prettier up close."

"And you bleed like a man," Jareth spat.

Maul lunged, and they collided—steel grinding against steel, boots slipping in rain-slicked muck. Jareth drove his elbow into Maul's ribs, but the bigger man slammed him back with the weight of a stone wall. Jareth hit the ground hard, vision flashing.

He rolled just as Maul's blade cracked the stone beside his head.

Then Jareth was on his feet, blood in his mouth, sword held in both hands.

He feinted left, stepped right, and drove his blade through the gap beneath Maul's pauldron. The knight roared in pain, staggering.

But not before he landed a crushing blow across Jareth's ribs.

Both men fell.

The rain fell with them.

Neither rose quickly.

Jareth lay gasping, his breath shallow, ribs cracking with every motion. Across from him, Maul knelt, one hand pressed to his side, the other still gripping his sword like a dying oath.

They stared at one another.

Equal. Broken. Alive.

And somewhere in the silence, the realm shifted again—not toward victory or peace, but toward the knowledge that even the strongest bleed.

The side gate beneath Crownspire's eastern wall—partially collapsed, half-hidden by rubble—offered the last path out of the encircled quarter. Jorund led the retreat, blood streaming from a gash across his brow, one arm around a wounded scout as they fled through smoke

and flame. Behind him, five Thornhart men and Sarn held the line, their boots sloshing through ash-thick mud, arrows singing past like wasps.

Then came the call: enemy reinforcements, slipping in through the breach behind them. Too many.

Sarn turned. “Go.”

Jorund stopped. “We stay together.”

“No,” Sarn said, gripping his axe, eyes wild and calm at once. “You carry what matters. You make it out. I buy you the steps.”

“You’re not dying here.”

Sarn grinned through blood. “Not dying. Just making someone regret the attempt.”

Then he shoved Jorund forward.

The bastards came hard—loyalists in mismatched armor, mercenaries with no house sigils, men too hungry or desperate to question orders. Sarn met them at the broken gate like a storm given flesh. His axe rose and fell, cleaving through shield and bone. He fought with the fury of a man who had already made peace with fire.

Jorund didn’t look back.

He pulled the scout into the shadows beyond the breach, leading the survivors toward the treeline, hearts pounding with guilt and breath.

Behind them, steel rang out once, twice—then silence.

Hours later, they would say Sarn had killed nine before the cudgel dropped.

They would say he laughed when they chained him.

They would say his last words before being dragged back into Crownspire were, “Tell him I’m not done.”

And Jorund, hearing the report from one of the men who escaped, stood beneath the trees for a long time, rain dripping from his cloak, the wound at his temple forgotten.

He didn’t speak.

He just stared at the fires rising behind the spire.

And knew this war had taken more than blood now.

It had taken the one man who never asked to be followed—only trusted.

The Gilded Thorn

The throne room of Crownspire had never been quiet—not truly. It echoed with centuries of triumph and treachery, every stone polished by the tread of boots too eager for power. But today, the silence was a veil drawn taut, broken only by the slow, deliberate footfalls of Prince Jhaeryn Blackwain.

He strode down the central aisle flanked by guards in red-and-black livery—men bought more than sworn, blades polished, eyes hollow. Behind him came priests from the High Temple, their robes newly dyed, their mouths tight with unsaid truths. Above them, banners bearing the old royal crest fluttered with false pride, each one altered subtly—the thorned flame brighter now, the crown raised higher above it.

At the far end, the throne waited. Cold stone, gilded in veins of gold. Empty.

Until now.

Jhaeryn stopped before it, head bowed not in reverence, but in calculation. The priest stepped forward and raised the crown.

It was not the true diadem of the Eldenor line—that had not been seen in public for years. This one was forged in haste, gleaming too brightly, adorned with rubies that had never belonged to kings. A crown of show, not lineage.

A *gilded thorn*.

As it lowered onto his head, the chamber held its breath.

"I stand before you," Jhaeryn declared, voice smooth as oil, "not as a prince, not as a ward of council or son of quiet kings—but as sovereign of a realm reborn. The crown has chosen movement over rot. Order over ruin. And I shall bear that burden."

Murmurs spread through the court—some fawning, others cautious. None brave enough to object aloud.

He raised one hand.

"By this crown, I claim the loyalty of the realm. By blood and fire, I will restore unity. And those who deny it—those who scatter the people with fear and false hope—shall face judgment."

In the gallery above, a raven flew against the high windows, struck the glass, and vanished into the storm.

Jhaeryn turned to face his kneeling court. Somewhere behind the veil of allegiance, Viremon's agents watched, unspeaking. Waiting.

Selara's stolen letters sat in a hidden satchel, only hours from being delivered.

Jareth bled in a tent beyond the wall.

Sarn rotted in chains.

Jorund sharpened a blade.

And far to the north, the old bloodlines stirred, colder than steel, older than crowns.

But for now, the gilded thorn had settled.

And the boy without a name wore the realm's greatest lie like a victory.

The declaration was still echoing when the chamber's air changed—not with shouts, nor applause, but with a ripple of tension, like a string drawn too tight.

From the side of the throne room, Viremon stepped forward.

No fanfare. No guards. Just the Whispermaster of Eldenor, cloaked in muted gray, his voice a blade honed not for war, but for silence undone.

"By what right," he said, loud enough to carry, "does a pretender claim what was never his?"

The entire court froze. Heads turned. Hands hovered near hilts.

Jhaeryn didn't move. "Speak carefully, Velvet," he said softly. "Treason wears many cloaks."

Viremon stepped to the center of the hall, unflinching.

"I have served three kings. I've seen what truth does to power. And I have watched you grow not into a ruler, but a shadow—poured into the mold of something greater, hoping none would notice the cracks."

He pulled a scroll from beneath his robe and let it unfurl, the wax seal of the midwives' ledger swinging at its base.

"Here lies proof," he said. "That the prince who stands crowned is no true son of Eldenor. The king's heir was lost. This one was chosen—not by birth, but by ambition."

A few nobles gasped. Others stepped back. The weight of truth fell heavier than any sword.

Jhaeryn's expression didn't change. "Lies dressed in the skin of parchment," he said. "You forget yourself."

"I remember everything," Viremon replied. "I remember the stillborn prince. The forged records. The coin passed to silence midwives and priests. And now, the final act—your farce of a coronation."

He took one more step forward, closer than any had dared approach the false king.

"You are not king. You are a threat wrapped in velvet."

That’s when the blade came.

Not from Jhaeryn—but from the side.

One of his red-liveried guards lunged from the dais, dagger flashing like lightning. Viremon turned too late.

The blade slid into his ribs, deep and cruel.

He staggered, coughing once, then fell to one knee, scroll still in hand.

Cries rang out. Chaos stirred. But the loyalists had already closed ranks around the throne.

Jhaeryn stepped forward, gazing down at the bleeding man with something colder than contempt—relief.

“You served long, Velvet,” he said. “But you’ve forgotten your role.”

Viremon looked up, blood at his lips.

“I remembered it too well,” he whispered.

Then he slumped forward, scroll crumpling beneath him.

In the rafters, a single raven flew from its perch, flapping madly toward the storm beyond the stained glass.

And outside the walls, the siege tightened.

The first true martyr had fallen.

They thought he was dead.

As the red-liveried guards tightened formation and the court devolved into a ripple of shock and silence, the Whispermaster’s body lay still beside the crumpled scroll—his blood spreading fast, too fast, across the cold marble floor. Eyes began to look away. The brave recoiled. The careful stepped back into the shadows.

But one man moved.

Teren Blackfoot had slipped into the chamber minutes earlier, cloaked in a courier’s garb and carrying nothing but a satchel of forged letters and a knife hidden in his boot. He hadn’t expected the old spymaster to stand before the court like that, hadn’t known Viremon would gamble everything so openly.

But when the blade struck, and Viremon fell, Teren didn’t hesitate.

He leapt over the balcony rail in a flash of black and gray, landing with a roll that sent the nearest guards stumbling backward. The second dagger he pulled from his boot caught the next man square in the thigh, dropping him in a shriek of steel and blood.

Gasps exploded through the chamber.

Teren knelt beside Viremon, already tearing cloth from his sleeve and pressing it hard into the wound beneath the ribs.

“Stupid old bastard,” he muttered. “You could’ve at least warned me before making yourself a hero.”

Viremon’s eyes fluttered open, dazed but aware. “Didn’t think you’d come.”

“Neither did I,” Teren growled. “But if you die here, I’ll have no one left to argue with.”

More guards approached. Teren stood between them and Viremon, dagger raised. “He lives,” he said coldly, “or the prince loses his only chance to make this look like a mistake instead of a massacre.”

Jhaeryn, still on the dais, studied the tableau with narrow eyes. His voice was a blade of its own. “Take them both.”

But Selara had already moved—stepping into view at the edge of the gallery, holding aloft another scroll, this one bearing the seal of Dawnspear.

“You arrest them,” she called, “and the South declares war today.”

Jhaeryn hesitated.

It was all the time Teren needed.

Two more steps and he had Viremon over his shoulder, staggering under the weight but moving fast—through the side passage used by servants and spies alike. Selara blocked pursuit with a tangle of words and legal threats, her voice rising to meet the storm as Teren vanished down the corridor.

Later, beneath the keep in a forgotten storeroom, Teren sat beside Viremon, who was pale and barely breathing.

“You should be dead,” Teren said.

Viremon managed a faint smile. “You’re good at making people regret that they aren’t.”

Teren shook his head, but the sneer was softer now.

“We’re not friends,” he muttered. “Just so we’re clear.”

“No,” Viremon rasped, “but you’re useful.”

Teren chuckled once, dry and tired. “Don’t die before I figure out how to hate you properly.”

And in the quiet beneath the crumbling throne of a false king, the realm's coldest schemer and its most reluctant cynic shared a silence thicker than loyalty—and closer to something almost like trust.

The dungeon beneath Crownspire was a place of deliberate design—stone carved not to hold men, but to erase them. No light, no echoes, only the damp breathing of walls too close and too old. Sarn had counted the hours by the sound of dripping water, by the shuffle of rats, by the steady pulse of fury behind his ribs.

They hadn't broken him. They hadn't even tried.

Two guards watched him day and night, men paid more for silence than loyalty. They mocked him at first—calling him beast, bastard, butcher. But when he didn't speak, didn't flinch, they started to worry. Men like Sarn didn't stay quiet unless they were thinking. And Sarn had been *thinking*.

On the sixth night, they made their mistake.

A routine change, one guard stepping in too close while the other turned to piss against the far wall. A bowl of spoiled stew shoved too close to Sarn's reach. No shackles. He hadn't needed them. They thought the bars were enough.

They weren't.

Sarn moved like the crack of bone—fast, violent, without warning. He slammed the bowl into the guard's face, the ceramic shattering against teeth and nose. Blood sprayed. The man stumbled back, and Sarn was already on him, dragging him through the bars with the strength of a man who had *waited*.

The other turned too late.

Sarn used the first guard's own shortblade, drawn from its scabbard with practiced ease, and drove it upward beneath the second man's ribs as he turned. A gasp, a twist, and silence.

The door was open two minutes later.

He didn't run. He moved with purpose—barefoot, silent, his bloodied hands gripping the stolen sword like a gift returned. Two more guards fell in the stairwell, too surprised to scream. By the time the alarm bell rang above, he was already gone, slipping through the servant passageways Viremon had once charted for escape routes no one remembered.

He emerged hours later in the drainage ditch beneath the outer curtain, his body soaked in filth and blood, his expression unchanged.

At the edge of the trees, a scout waited—one of Jorund's men, silent and watchful. The boy froze at the sight of the figure approaching from the muck.

"Sarn?" the scout whispered.

Sarn nodded once.

“They said you were dead.”

Sarn looked toward the spires behind him. “They almost made it true.”

Then he took the cloak the scout offered, draped it over his shoulders, and started toward the hills.

“Where are we going?” the boy asked.

Sarn didn’t look back.

“To burn what needs burning.”

Before dawn broke, before the crows left the ramparts, the eastern gate of Crownspire stood quiet—its heavy timbers dark with rain, its towers manned by mercenaries too tired to suspect what waited in the dark. The prince had fortified the western approaches, expecting a siege to hammer the front. But Jorund knew better. He knew war was never won where everyone looked.

He came with ghosts—Blackmoor’s rangers, clothed in ash and pine, men trained not to charge, but to vanish between shadows. Thirty of them, led by Jorund himself, crept up through the forgotten quarry path that once supplied the stone for the city’s expansion. Now it served another purpose.

At the edge of the walls, they waited for the fog.

And when it came—low, thick, curling like breath from a sleeping beast—they moved.

Two sentries died before they made a sound, arrows through their throats. The third saw nothing until Jorund’s dagger touched his spine.

“Drop the horn,” Jorund said softly. “And you leave alive.”

The man did.

They took the towers in under six minutes.

By the time the main gates creaked open, the rangers were inside the walls, the drawbridge unlatched, the counterweights cut.

From the hills beyond, a second wave advanced—Thornhart riders cloaked in black, with no banners flying. Just purpose.

Jorund stood atop the eastern tower, wind tearing through his cloak, and watched the sun rise over a city that had called him bastard for most of his life.

Now it was *his* gate.

Behind him, a ranger approached, breathless. “They’re rallying inside. Loyalists from the southern quarter. They’ll come fast.”

Jorund nodded, calm. “Then we hold faster.”

He looked to the west, toward the prince’s spires.

“Tell the others,” he said. “The gates are ours.”

The message went out on silent runners and winged birds.

And across the fields and camps beyond the city, hope flared like a lit torch in the fog.

The first crack in the prince’s wall had opened.

And Jorund, the bastard son of Coldhearth, had pried it loose with blood and patience.

A Queen in Shadow

The royal treasury of Crownspire was never meant to be breached. Carved into the mountain beneath the citadel’s spine, its vault doors were forged from dwarven steel, sealed with sigils long thought unbreakable, and guarded by men paid too well to think twice.

But money, Selara Lythorne knew, was a fickle ally. And loyalty bought once could always be bought again.

She descended into the lower levels of the keep under the guise of an evacuation order—documents forged, signed with Jhaeryn’s seal, passed through panicked hands too eager to obey. The guards at the vault never questioned her. They stepped aside without a word.

Two were hers already. A third had been promised a title when all was said and done.

Only the steward resisted—a hunched man named Corvin who’d served three kings and trusted none. When he reached for the alarm chain, Selara didn’t blink. Her blade flashed once. He died without theatrics.

“Unfortunate,” she murmured, wiping the blood from the polished stone floor. “But inevitable.”

With the keys taken from his belt and the passphrase drawn from an intercepted courier’s codebook, the vault opened.

Inside, the air was dry and cold. Crates of ingots lined the far walls. Shelves sagged with ledgers, sealed documents, and jewels marked for diplomatic tribute. And in the center, three coffers sat like gods waiting to be awakened—one for coin, one for debt records, one for military stipends.

Selara didn’t hesitate.

She moved like a queen—calm, precise, without mercy.

Within the hour, she had arranged a quiet redistribution. Coin chests were rerouted to safe houses throughout the city. Trusted messengers were dispatched under cover of chaos. Promises were attached not just to silver, but to debts erased and futures bought.

Dawnspear lords whose loyalty wavered would soon find their ships fully funded. Blackmoor officers unsure of their next meal would now feed whole regiments.

And the mercenaries Jhaeryn had once paid to hold the city?

They would be offered more to walk away.

Selara sealed the vault behind her as she left, locking the last trace of the old order within stone.

She did not announce what she'd done. She did not need to.

Because by dusk, the city whispered a new truth:

Jhaeryn wore a crown.

But Selara held the purse.

And in the war to come, gold would bleed longer than steel.

The corridors near the royal solar were quiet now—guarded not by battalions, but by silence and fear. Most of Jhaeryn's inner circle had fled, fallen, or found their allegiances shifted in the wind. But one remained.

Lord Meron Halvek.

Old blood, old blade. A mountain of a man draped in crimson, his honor bound tightly to the prince's fate. He had no illusions of Jhaeryn's birthright, but he had chosen his side the way all war veterans do—with finality. He guarded the solar not for loyalty, but for the belief that chaos without rule was worse than tyranny cloaked in velvet.

Serenya Thornhart found him sitting in the antechamber beside the solar door, a goblet of spiced wine in one hand, the other resting on the hilt of his sword.

He didn't stand when she entered.

"They say you escaped," he said, voice like dry gravel. "Twice."

"I walk where they don't look," Serenya replied, stepping lightly across the stone. "And I speak to those they don't hear."

"You're here to plead for mercy?"

"No," she said. "I'm here to offer it."

He chuckled. "You bring mercy in silk and perfume?"

“I bring it in memory.” She produced a bottle from her sleeve—slender, deep green glass, sealed in wax. “This was once your favorite. I remembered.”

He took it, studied it.

“My brother sent you?”

“No,” she said. “He doesn’t ask others to kill.”

Halvek nodded slowly. “But you do.”

She said nothing.

He uncorked the bottle and poured a measure into his goblet, the scent of honeyed fig and winterberry curling up into the air. He drank with the quiet dignity of a man who knew what this was.

“Why me?” he asked.

“Because you’d never bend. And the door behind you must open.”

“I was loyal,” he said.

“To a lie,” she replied. “And lies don’t deserve your sword.”

He set the goblet down.

A moment passed.

Then another.

He exhaled slowly, and his hand slipped from the hilt.

Serenya watched as the strength faded from his shoulders, his eyes glassing over with peace or regret—she could not tell.

When his body stilled, she stepped forward and closed his eyes with her fingertips.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For choosing grace.”

Then she turned to the solar door.

Only one man remained within.

And the key had just fallen still at her feet.

The doors of the throne room groaned open like the gates of some ancient crypt, the great iron hinges shrieking against the stone. Jareth Lythorne stood in the doorway, or rather—*leaned* in it—his shoulder blood-soaked, his left arm bound with strips of a torn cloak. Every step forward was paid in pain. But he did not stop.

The hall was quiet.

No courtiers remained. The nobles had fled to cellars or cloisters, waiting to see which banner would hang above the spire at dawn. Only the torn remnants of the prince's ceremony remained—discarded banners, broken candelabras, the crown's dais glowing beneath stained glass that no longer gleamed.

Jareth walked alone.

Each step echoed.

The blood trail behind him marked a grim path, but he wore no expression of defeat. Only purpose. In his right hand, his sword still hung, tip dragging, nicked and blackened from battle. His breath came in ragged gasps.

And still, he advanced.

At the base of the dais, he stopped.

It took all his strength to raise his head. And there, seated on the high stone throne, back rigid, crown glinting in the fading light, sat Prince Jhaeryn Blackwain.

The false king.

Their eyes met.

"You're late," Jhaeryn said, voice calm.

"I had... roads to clear," Jareth answered, his voice hoarse. "Friends to bury."

"And now?" the prince asked, gesturing vaguely to the ruin around them. "Do you come to bend the knee? Or die with your principles intact?"

Jareth took one final step forward and dropped to one knee—not in fealty, but from the weight of blood loss. He used his sword to hold himself upright.

"I came," he said, breathing through clenched teeth, "to watch the lie fall… in person."

Jhaeryn smiled faintly. "You should have stayed in the mud."

"Too many others already lie in it," Jareth replied. "And none of them wore your crown."

The hall went still again.

Then Jareth, broken but unbowed, lifted his blade, resting it across his knee. Not to strike. Not yet.

But to promise.

One way or another, the next words spoken in that chamber would shape the fate of a realm.

The throne room held its breath.

Jhaeryn remained seated, poised as ever, his fingers curled around the gilded armrests like claws polished for ceremony. Jareth knelt below him, too battered to rise, too proud to fall. Rain whispered at the high windows, and the distant thunder of war faded beneath the tension inside these walls.

And then the final figure entered.

Serenya.

She moved through the chamber with a silence that defied the storm. Her gown was torn, soaked at the hem, the white streaks in her hair gleaming like silver knives. No guards barred her way. None remained. Only the weight of her steps and the look in her eyes—clear, cold, and done with fear.

Jhaeryn turned his head as she approached, a faint smile forming.

"So," he said, voice velvet and ash. "You survived."

"Not quite," Serenya replied.

She stood at the base of the dais, beside Jareth, who raised his eyes just enough to meet hers.

"You don't have to," he murmured, pain threading every word.

"I already did," she said softly.

Jhaeryn gestured toward the empty space beside the throne. "You could still sit beside me. You always had a place here."

Serenya climbed the steps slowly.

With every footfall, her past fell away—the betrothal forced upon her, the silence she endured, the brother she lost, the blood spilled in her name. She reached the top and stood before him, the prince who crowned himself on a throne of lies.

She leaned in close, close enough that only he could hear.

"I was never yours," she whispered.

And then she plunged the dagger into his heart.

It was not ornate. It was not dramatic. It was quick—deft, quiet, clean.

Jhaeryn's eyes widened in shock, not pain. He reached for her, but she stepped back, letting him crumple sideways, the false crown slipping from his head and clattering to the floor.

He didn't speak again.

The throne was still.

Serenya descended the steps with slow, even strides, her hands steady, her face unreadable. She passed Jareth, who stared at the corpse above with hollow eyes.

“He needed to die,” she said, more to herself than to anyone.

Jareth nodded once. “He did.”

And in the silence that followed, not one soul mourned the fallen prince.

Dawn crept slowly over Crownspire, casting pale gold across soot-stained towers and blood-slicked streets. Smoke still curled from the merchant quarter, but the thunder of war had faded into the silence of aftermath. The city did not cheer. It did not weep. It waited.

And in the grand hall, where once a false prince had ruled behind veils of splendor and cruelty, Lady Selara Lythorne stood before the throne—calm, poised, and already draped in mourning black touched with silver thread. Not mourning for Jhaeryn. For the realm that had forgotten how to choose its kings.

Beside her stood a boy no older than thirteen. Slender, dark-haired, sharp-eyed. Dressed plainly, though his bearing hinted at something more. He stood straight, unafraid, as if he belonged—not because he wanted to, but because he *had* to.

The court, fractured but reassembling, filled the chamber with hushed voices. Banners were lowered. Helms were doffed. And when Selara raised one hand, silence followed.

“The Crown is not a toy to be passed from thief to zealot,” she said, her voice smooth and commanding. “It is a promise—to preserve, to protect, to endure.”

She turned slowly, letting her gaze sweep across lords and soldiers, emissaries and whisperers, allies bought and forged in fire. She spoke not as a noblewoman, but as something far colder and more necessary.

“Prince Jhaeryn was not the king’s son,” she continued. “He was a pretender raised in place of grief, and the lie of his rule brought this realm to the edge of ruin. We will not allow another crown to pass through chaos.”

She placed her hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“This is Alric. Son of Eldenor by blood, though not by name. A child of the old king—born of silence, protected by necessity. Today, that silence ends.”

A ripple of shock moved through the court.

Jareth, seated on a marble step, blood still drying beneath his armor, met her eyes. He did not smile. He simply watched.

Selara lifted her chin.

“Until he comes of age, I will serve as Regent of the Realm. With the council’s guidance. With the people’s eyes. And with the promise that no crown will again rest upon the head of a tyrant while I draw breath.”

No cheers. Just solemn nods, grudging approval. Enough.

The boy said nothing. He didn’t need to.

Selara turned to the throne. She did not sit.

She placed her son’s hand upon the armrest.

And the realm shifted once more—not toward peace, not yet. But toward order.

Born not from bloodlines alone—but from will.

Scars in Snow

Snow fell on Crownspire like forgiveness, soft and slow, covering the cracked stones and bloodstains with a pale shroud. The fires had been put out. The bodies gathered. The banners torn down or raised anew, depending on who now held the walls. The siege was over, but the city did not rejoice.

It mourned.

Black-draped women swept charred wood from merchant stalls. Masons began measuring the breaks in the eastern walls. Children emerged from cellars with wary eyes, finding their streets not gone, but changed. The air smelled of wet stone, ash, and something fragile—*hope,* perhaps, though none dared name it aloud.

At dawn, a quiet rumor passed from mouth to mouth. A name.

Sarn.

Some swore they saw him leave the city before the gates reopened, hood pulled low, a heavy pack slung over one shoulder. Others claimed he never left the dungeons at all. That he’d died escaping and his story was just one of a hundred ghosts now stitched into the stone.

But when Jorund found the ranger’s barracks—empty and cold—he found two things on the iron-banded table where the dwarf had once sharpened his blades.

A dagger, notched and dark with old blood.

And a flask, still half full, untouched.

No note. No farewell.

Just the quiet evidence of a man who had given everything he could—and knew when to leave before the world demanded more.

Jorund stared at the items for a long time, then took the dagger and tied it to his belt. He left the flask untouched.

“Rest, old friend,” he murmured. “Or raise hell elsewhere.”

Outside, the snow continued to fall.

And as the city stirred—its pain not yet healed, but its heart still beating—one figure slipped unnoticed into the white-laced forest beyond the gates.

Not gone. Not finished.

Just... elsewhere.

The road north was long, but no longer lonely.

Jorund rode without guards, without fanfare, with only the dagger on his belt and the silence of memory beside him. The scars on his arm had begun to fade, but the weight of the war did not. He wore it in his posture now—taller, slower, measured like a man who had seen too much and come through it not unbroken, but *unbent*.

When Coldhearth’s gates opened, the air was sharp with pine and frost. The watchmen saluted as he passed, not out of habit, but respect. In the bailey, the hearthfires had been stoked for his arrival, but no celebration waited. Only duty. Only history.

And at the top of the long stair that led to the high seat of House Thornhart stood Lord Kulvar, cloaked in furs, eyes shadowed but steady. The old man did not smile, but there was no pride in his bearing—only a quiet relief, like someone seeing a wound finally close.

“I heard you’d survived,” Kulvar said.

Jorund dismounted, nodding once. “I heard you were still holding court.”

The hall was emptier than before. Fewer banners, fewer blades. But it felt clearer, somehow. The air less weighed down by silence.

“I named you heir once,” Kulvar said, his voice low. “Then I tried to undo it.”

Jorund stepped onto the dais. “You didn’t fail.”

“I didn’t succeed, either.”

“No,” Jorund agreed. “But you offered the name.”

He looked past his father to the empty high seat.

“And now,” he said, “I take it.”

A long silence passed between them.

Then Kulvar stepped aside.

Jorund climbed the final step and turned to face the hall.

When he sat, the seat groaned beneath the weight not of his body—but of his *right*. Not a claim earned in bloodlines or paperwork, but in fire, snow, and war.

The bannermen gathered below did not cheer. But they bowed.

And Jorund Thornhart—no longer bastard, no longer exile—met their gaze with the calm certainty of a man who no longer needed permission to lead.

Outside, snow drifted across the battlements.

Coldhearth, at last, had its lord.

Selara stood atop the eastern balcony of Crownspire's high keep, where the winds were sharp and the sky stretched wide, cold and watchful. Below her, the city stirred—markets reopening, banners shifting color, soldiers marching in unfamiliar livery. On the surface, the capital had accepted its new order.

But Selara knew better.

The boy sat the throne, yes. Her son by name, though the truth of his blood ran thicker with secrets than the wine poured at court. His small hand rested easily on the armrest, and his eyes—cool, quiet, far too old for thirteen—rarely strayed from her when visitors spoke. He wore the crown lightly, but its weight pressed heavy on *her* shoulders.

She had done what none had dared.

Seized the treasury. Unseated a pretender. Installed a child not only without question, but without vote. The council had been stunned into obedience, and the great houses, fractured and weary, had nodded for now.

But the nods were brittle.

They watched her.

From the side galleries during audiences. In whispered corners of the court. They called her *Regent*, yes—but never *queen*, and never without the edge of a question.

Rumors spread. That her son was not the king's. That she ruled through poison and silence. That Viremon, bleeding and half-alive somewhere in the lower keep, whispered warnings to those still loyal to the old order.

Selara met these whispers with precision.

She invited lesser lords to feast beside her. She reappointed Dawnspear's envoys with lavish gifts. She sent grain to the riverlands before they could ask. Always a step ahead, always with a smile.

But still the halls felt colder than they had under Jhaeryn. Not out of fear—but uncertainty. She had bought time.

Not loyalty.

And she knew it.

In her chambers, she kept two letters sealed and unsent—one to Blackmoor, offering her son's hand in alliance. The other, addressed to Jorund Thornhart, asking for nothing but *trust*.

She hadn't sent either.

Not yet.

Selara Lythorne had risen higher than any woman born without crown or prophecy.

But high places fall hardest.

And she could feel the stone beneath her shifting, ever so slightly, beneath the snow.

In the catacombs beneath Crownspire, where even courtiers feared to tread and old stones remembered older secrets, Viremon sat in the last chamber that still belonged to him. The candles burned low. The air was damp with age and silence. His robes, once the color of midnight, had faded to ash-gray. His hands trembled when he poured the ink.

But he was alive.

Barely.

The blade Jhaeryn's loyalist had driven beneath his ribs had missed his heart by less than a finger's breadth. The healing had been slow, the pain constant, but it was not the wound that had crippled him.

It was the world that no longer listened.

Selara had not dismissed him outright. She was too shrewd for that. She had let him remain, let him recover, and even visited once—smiling, polite, making clear that his place was now *past*. A symbol. A relic. Not a player.

The Whispermaster of Eldenor had been replaced—not in name, but in relevance.

He watched from the shadows now, his web of spies still half-intact, though some had drifted to other banners. Whispers came slower, costlier. The city had learned new games, and he was no longer holding the board.

So he chose.

One evening, before dawn could stretch its fingers across the stone towers, he packed a single satchel. No fanfare. No farewell. Just a folded cloak, a half-empty journal, and a sealed letter left upon his desk.

To the Regent, it read.

I did not fight for a crown, nor for legacy. Only to see truth named before it was buried. You have the realm now. Keep it breathing. Or bury it gently.

He walked the eastern gate on foot, no escort, no disguise. The guards, recognizing him, said nothing. One nodded. The other looked away.

Outside the walls, snow began to fall.

Viremon did not look back.

He had served three kings.

He would not serve a fourth.

And as the last Whispermaster vanished into the white haze beyond the capital, the realm exhaled—uncertain whether it had lost its sharpest blade or simply set it aside.

The frost stretched out before her like memory—white, endless, soft as ash. The wind that kissed her cheeks was colder than it had been in Crownspire, but cleaner too. Honest. It carried no whispers, no names, no demands. Only breath.

Serenya Thornhart walked alone.

Her boots left a line of prints across the high ridge above the old Frostmark pass, the same trail she had once ridden as a girl beneath fur-lined cloaks, her mind filled with songs and duty. But there were no songs now. Only silence. And steps.

The city was behind her. The war, the throne, the blood.

She had left without title, without escort. Jareth had watched her go, saying nothing. Selara had not tried to stop her. Even the boy king—young Alric with his mother's eyes and too many secrets—had only nodded as she passed.

She was no longer a lady of court.

No longer a piece on any board.

She was something else now. Not cold, not cruel—but *forged.*

She had killed a king. Or something like one. And in doing so, had shed every skin the realm had wrapped around her. Betrothed. Sister. Dove. She had unmade them all with a single blade.

At the edge of the ridge, she paused. Below her, the forests of home stretched dark and silent. Somewhere beyond lay Thornhart lands—different now. Ruled by Jorund, a brother reforged by fire. She might visit. She might not.

She had no destination.

Only direction.

A leather-bound book hung at her side, half-filled with names, thoughts, memories. Not to be shared. Just remembered.

She touched the cover, then closed her eyes as the wind rose.

Serenya Thornhart had once been told that frost preserved everything it touched.

But she knew better now.

Frost didn't preserve.

It carved.

Restless Steel

The halls of the old watchtower at Dunmar Hollow had been empty for years. Its walls were cracked, its roof half-collapsed, and its well had gone dry long before the war. It had been a place once meant to hold the frontier. Now, it held something stranger: purpose.

Teren Blackfoot stood in the courtyard, wind tugging at his cloak, a scroll of names in one hand and a chipped blade in the other. Around him, the beginnings of a strange gathering had taken root—men and women in mismatched armor, mercenaries turned vagrants, scouts with no banners left to serve. Survivors.

They came not for gold.

They came because they were tired of watching.

"You won't be knights," Teren said, speaking plainly. "You won't be lords. You won't wear house colors, and no court will kneel when you pass."

The men and women before him stood still, listening.

"But you'll be *witnesses*."

He turned slowly, meeting their eyes.

"There's no throne left that speaks for all. No seal that holds this realm together. Not yet. So we'll be something older. Not bound by blood, not bought by silver. Just *steel*."

He tapped the blade against the stones beneath his feet. The sound rang clear.

“When a village burns and the high houses look away—we’ll see it. When a merchant's road is choked by bandits and no lord sends riders—we’ll ride. And when peace is threatened by those who profit from the next war, we’ll remind them what fear looks like from the other side.”

A grizzled woman with a broken nose raised her hand. “What do we call ourselves?”

Teren looked out at the empty horizon.

“We don’t need a name,” he said. “Just purpose.”

Then he smirked, faint and tired.

“But if you have to call it something... call it restless steel.”

The wind shifted.

Above them, a forgotten banner still clung to the tower’s wall—blank, tattered, and waiting.

And beneath it, something new had begun.

Not noble.

Not holy.

Just necessary.

The summons came twice.

Once from Selara’s new court—an ink-sealed letter written in her careful hand, offering him a position as advisor, a seat on the regency council, and the veiled promise of shaping the realm’s next chapter.

The second came from Alric, scrawled in the uncertain script of a boy trying to sound like a king.

Jareth burned them both.

He did not do it out of disdain. He read them, held them, sat with them for a night beneath the fading banners of Rosebarrow’s outer keep. Then he fed them to the fire and walked away.

He had given all he could to courts and crowns. He had buried comrades under every shade of sky. He had held lines no one remembered and bled for causes already bartered away. His sword was still sharp. His name still carried weight. But his heart no longer answered to halls of polished stone.

He left before sunrise.

No fanfare. No guards.

Just a single black mare and a worn travel cloak, the same one he'd bled in outside Crownspire's gates.

He rode west—into the old borderlands where the maps frayed and the names blurred. Into hills that had once belonged to broken houses, half-blood lines, and kin forgotten in peace and exiled in war.

The road was quiet, save for the crows.

Some said he sought a forgotten cousin in the Stormmead hills. Others claimed he rode for the coast, to the ruined lighthouse where his mother had been born. A few believed he was chasing nothing—only distance.

But they were wrong.

Jareth Lythorne rode not to escape, but to *find.*

Not glory.

Not power.

Just a family scattered by time, truth buried deeper than banners, and the last thread of a name he barely knew how to carry.

He did not say goodbye.

He simply rode.

And in his silence, the realm understood—he was not done.

Only choosing.

The court had grown quieter, but not gentler.

With the prince gone and the boy-king seated under Selara's careful hand, the halls of Crownspire no longer echoed with clashing ambition—they murmured. Soft voices in alcoves. Half-finished greetings. Eyes that looked away too quickly. And questions that never made it to parchment, but passed like ash from mouth to mouth.

Who is he, truly?

Alric. Yes. But of which blood?

They whispered of the missing records, of the nursemaid paid too handsomely, of the timing. Some said the boy had Lythorne eyes. Others swore he resembled no one at all. No king. No nobleman. Just a clever ghost, placed like a stone on a balance by a mother who played a game no man had ever dared win.

Selara heard every rumor.

She always had.

They slid beneath her doors like smoke, curled up from courtiers' smiles, lingered in the quills of her own scribes. And she answered none of them.

She wore silence like armor.

But she knew how brittle silence could be.

In the garden, she met privately with a trusted scribe—one of the few still loyal by heart, not coin. She dictated letters not for alliances or decrees, but for history. A carefully constructed lineage. A public record. Names selected, obscured, reinforced. A grandfather here, a discreet midwife there.

Truth reshaped—not lied, simply *refined.*

Still, the whispers grew.

One day, Alric asked her directly.

"Is it true?"

Selara had paused for only a breath.

"No," she said. "And even if it were, it would not matter. You sit the throne because you carry the burden no one else would. That is blood enough."

The boy nodded once and asked no more.

But Selara saw the doubt in his eyes.

It wasn't fear.

It was understanding.

He knew already what kind of world he ruled—and what kind of mother had built it for him.

That night, alone in her solar, Selara lit a single candle and watched it burn.

The room was still.

But the flame trembled.

Saltmere lay beneath a slate sky, the sea bruised and restless, its waves slamming against the harbor walls like fists too long restrained. The city had quieted after the war—trade returning, knives sheathed, the crimson sails of raiders lowered or repainted. But beneath the docks, behind tavern doors, and deep in the salt-stained halls of the old seaforts, something stirred.

The old kings were watching.

They had survived the storm not through loyalty, but patience. They had lent men to the northern cause, not out of belief in peace, but for vengeance delayed. Their coins helped arm rebels. Their ships had lingered at the edge of the conflict, striking and vanishing when convenient. And when the false prince fell, they cheered—but not for what came next.

A boy-king. A regency. A realm held by a Lythorne.

It was not what they had been promised.

In the halls of Deadrock Keep, where salt and iron crusted every wall, Lord Marek of the Bloodwater Line sat with his sons and captains, a map of the coast unfurled before him.

“She thinks the war is over,” he muttered, voice like low tide over rocks. “But the sea doesn’t forget. And neither do we.”

“She controls the treasury,” one of his sons warned. “The nobles kneel.”

“They kneel because they’re tired,” Marek replied. “Not loyal. Just waiting.”

He stabbed a knife into the map where Crownspire sat—an old knife, curved and rusted at the edge.

“Let her spend coin. Let her call it peace. But when the snows break, we rise. And we remind them that kings who never died still remember how to kill.”

Outside, the wind shifted.

Fishermen watched the horizon.

And far below the docks, an old signal torch was lit—one that had not burned since the war began.

Saltmere would not strike first.

But it would not stay still.

And in the storm to come, old debts would be paid in full.

Spring crept into the realm slowly, like a guest unsure of their welcome. Snow melted from the hills, the rivers began to flow again, and the roads—once carved by war—were slowly filled with carts instead of soldiers. Crops were planted. Letters sent. Markets reopened. On the surface, peace returned.

But it was a peace like glass.

In Crownspire, the regency court functioned with the elegance of clockwork—committees, edicts, silken smiles over sharpened questions. Selara’s son sat the throne with practiced stillness, nodding at the right moments, asking the right questions. But the council chambers

were colder than before. Every agreement came with a second glance. Every ally had terms. The walls did not echo with loyalty.

They echoed with calculation.

In the west, Blackmoor rebuilt its forges, but it did not send troops east. Not yet. In the north, Coldhearth stood firm beneath Lord Jorund, who received emissaries but offered no banners. His loyalty was not uncertain—only *reserved.* He watched the realm like a hunter at the treeline, eyes narrowed, blade in hand.

Dawnspear pledged unity, but its ships lingered in the bay longer than needed, sails always half-unfurled. Even the churches in the riverlands spoke softly of succession, of divine order. Not rebellion. Just... doubt.

And in every tavern, every market square, someone still asked:

Where is Teren Blackfoot now?

Did Sarn truly vanish, or was he buried in silence?

Will Selara keep her crown when her son speaks with his own voice?

The realm had steadied, yes.

But it was the stillness of a blade held just above the skin.

And though no war flags flew, and no drums sounded in the hills, every noble, every whisperer, every merchant who had learned to count power like coin, could feel the truth settling beneath their ribs:

This peace was earned.

It would not last.

The Quiet Before

Winter fell early.

It came not with blizzard or howl, but with a hush. The kind of cold that seeped in beneath doors, silencing hearths and stilling the breath of men who had once shouted war-cries into storm-swept fields. The snow came softly, blanketing the Six Realms like a burial shroud too clean for what lay beneath.

In Coldhearth, the frost crept over stone battlements, icing the spears left resting against the walls. Jorund stood atop the high tower at dawn each day, watching the wind slide down from the north like an omen, his eyes drawn not to the horizon, but to the stillness *within*.

In Blackmoor, the forges slowed. Not for want of fire, but because no orders came. The iron cooled. The miners dug slower. The soldiers trained, but without urgency. The old count read each dispatch three times before replying, his ink drying slower than before.

Saltmere's docks froze in silence. The waves slapped against hulls too empty to sail. No new ships were built. The taverns remained full, but laughter never rose past the rafters. Lords who once bellowed in defiance now sat behind shuttered windows, writing letters they never sent.

And in Crownspire, Selara's court carried on like a machine wound too tightly. Edicts were passed. Petitions filed. But each word spoken in council was too carefully measured, too heavy with the fear of being the one to speak first. Alric ruled in name. Selara ruled in deed. But neither could move without drawing attention. The air itself felt brittle.

Even the ravens flew lower.

Messages grew shorter.

The fires burned hotter.

And still, no battle cry came.

No new war.

Just cold.

And the waiting.

Winter had come not as an enemy—but as a breath held too long.

And the realm, healed in appearance, began to feel again the sharp, quiet pressure of something beneath the snow.

Not peace.

Not yet.

Something *before.*

The first snow fell without warning, soft as ash, drifting down over Coldhearth's stone ramparts and curling through the arrow slits like breath from a ghost. It layered the rooftops and cloaked the courtyard's dead tree in white, delicate frost catching on its black branches like brittle lace.

Lord Jorund Thornhart stood in the high tower alone, wrapped in a heavy cloak, his breath a mist curling past his beard. Below, the keep's guards moved in silence, boots muffled by the snow. No shouts. No orders. Just the steady rhythm of a house keeping time by duty.

He had earned the seat. Sat in his father's chair. Spoke in his voice. Issued judgment and mercy in equal measure. The bannermen called him *my lord* now without hesitation. The

servants moved when he entered. The children of the hold ran at his approach, not away. The name Thornhart, once weighted with rejection, now rested fully on his shoulders.

And yet.

Peace had not come with it.

He had fought to survive the war, and then to stop it. He had buried too many—some by sword, others by silence. He had watched Crownspire burn, had held the gates that opened the final act of rebellion, had led men through streets slick with blood.

And now, with the banners still, with the quiet heavy upon the realm, there was nothing left to fight.

But still he stood at the tower each dawn, sword belted at his side, waiting.

Not because he feared an enemy.

Because he *knew* one would come.

The realm was a wolf's den in winter—sleeping, yes, but teeth still sharp. And though he wore the name, the title, the furs of a Lord, he had not forgotten what it meant to live with a blade drawn beneath the table.

He watched the snow fall for a long time.

And when he finally turned from the window, he left no tracks on the cold stone behind him.

Only silence.

The wind whispered through the high passes, threading its chill fingers through the old watchtower where Serenya Thornhart had taken shelter. The fire crackled low, casting her shadow in long curves across the stone. She sat cross-legged beside it, wrapped in a cloak of plain wool, her lute resting against her knee.

The world had changed since she last played.

Her fingers moved slowly now—not out of rust, but caution. As if the notes themselves might draw ghosts from the snow.

Before her, a scrap of parchment lay weighed down with a stone, already smeared with ink and half-mended lines. It wasn't a love song. Nor an elegy. It was a reckoning.

She read the words aloud softly, shaping them in the firelight.

"The boy wore silk and lies for skin,
Crowned not by truth, but those who sinned.
I kissed his hand, and smiled so sweet—
Then drove the thorn where kings can't bleed."

Her voice wavered, but not from fear.

She did not sing for an audience.

This was a song for herself.

For the quiet girl in Frostmark who once sang to calm the halls. For the would-be bride in Eldenor who swallowed every insult behind a smile. For the sister who waited too long. For the woman who buried her dagger in a false king and walked away from the crown it left behind.

She sang not with clarity, but with memory.

"I walked through fire, I walked through snow,
Not for love, nor pride, nor throne.
But for the silence I now claim—
And the ghost that wears my name."

When it ended, the wind sighed through the cracks in the tower, as if answering.

She let the lute fall still and set the parchment aside. There would be no applause. No court to immortalize her words. Just snow outside, and a cold sky, and the faintest sense that someone, somewhere, might one day hear the song and know it was born not from grief—

But from resolve.

And the thorn that still rested quietly in her own chest.

The road twisted through nameless hills where no banners flew and the snow crept like a memory along the ridgelines. Here, the war had never reached, and yet the soil still felt scorched, as if it remembered things the world had chosen to forget.

Sarn walked it alone.

Cloak torn at the hem, boots scuffed with salt and mud, he moved without urgency and without destination. His axe was gone, traded for a short sword slung low across his back, a blade made for silence, not show. He wore no crest. No sigil. No badge of house or honor. And yet, people moved aside when they saw him pass.

He had the look.

That hollow-eyed stillness of someone who had *survived* too much to be unscarred.

In some villages, they called him a soldier. In others, a killer. One boy whispered he might be a spirit sent from the north, risen from the snow to watch men lie again. Sarn never corrected them.

He took work when it found him—hauling timber, fixing gates, once defending a farmstead from a pair of thieves who fled the moment he drew steel. He asked no coin. Only warmth. And a place to sleep where he could see the door.

One night, in a tavern along a forgotten creek, a drunk lordling tried to name him.

“You’re one of *them,* aren’t you?” the man slurred. “From Crownspire. The war. The thorned ones. You were with *her.*”

Sarn looked at him with eyes that had seen too many deaths to care about titles.

“No,” he said. “I was with the dying.”

The tavern fell quiet.

He left before dawn.

Some said he walked east after that, toward the mountains that swallowed sound. Others claimed he vanished into the woods near Dawnspear. A few believed he simply stopped one day—sat down beside the road, closed his eyes, and never opened them again.

But those who knew better said he still walked.

Not toward anything.

Not away from anything.

Just forward.

The ghost of a war that had not quite ended.

In the end, the fire dimmed.

The banners hung still. The swords were sheathed. The letters ceased to bear blood or ash, and the names once spoken with urgency became history—recited, debated, recorded. Jareth became a ghost on a western road. Sarn a rumor with boots. Serenya, a whisper of a song no bard dared claim. Selara remained, poised like a knife set neatly on a velvet cloth.

And the realm breathed.

But not deeply.

Because beneath the frost, the embers smoldered.

A merchant in Blackmoor found his taxes raised by hands he never voted for. A minor lord in Saltmere received a sealed letter with no crest, only a black sun scrawled in ink. A widow in Dawnspear heard her son speak of kings and swords in ways that sounded far too familiar.

And in Crownspire, the boy king smiled at his tutors and asked sharp questions when no one was listening.

No rebellions. No decrees.

Just tension.

Just cold.

The game, as ever, never ended. It only changed shape—like smoke, or snow, or silence before a storm. Peace was the pause. Not the end. A lull in the song. A breath before the blade.

In chambers lit with gentle firelight, Selara signed treaties with a steady hand and kept her back to the windows.

In the north, Jorund read letters by a hearth that crackled too softly.

In the east, a raven crossed the sky, its wings dark against the pale light of winter.

And somewhere far away, a child born of no noble house asked a question no one had ever dared.

The fire may have died.

But the coals beneath still whispered heat.

And the game—the ancient game of thrones, silence, shadow, and steel—

was only waiting.